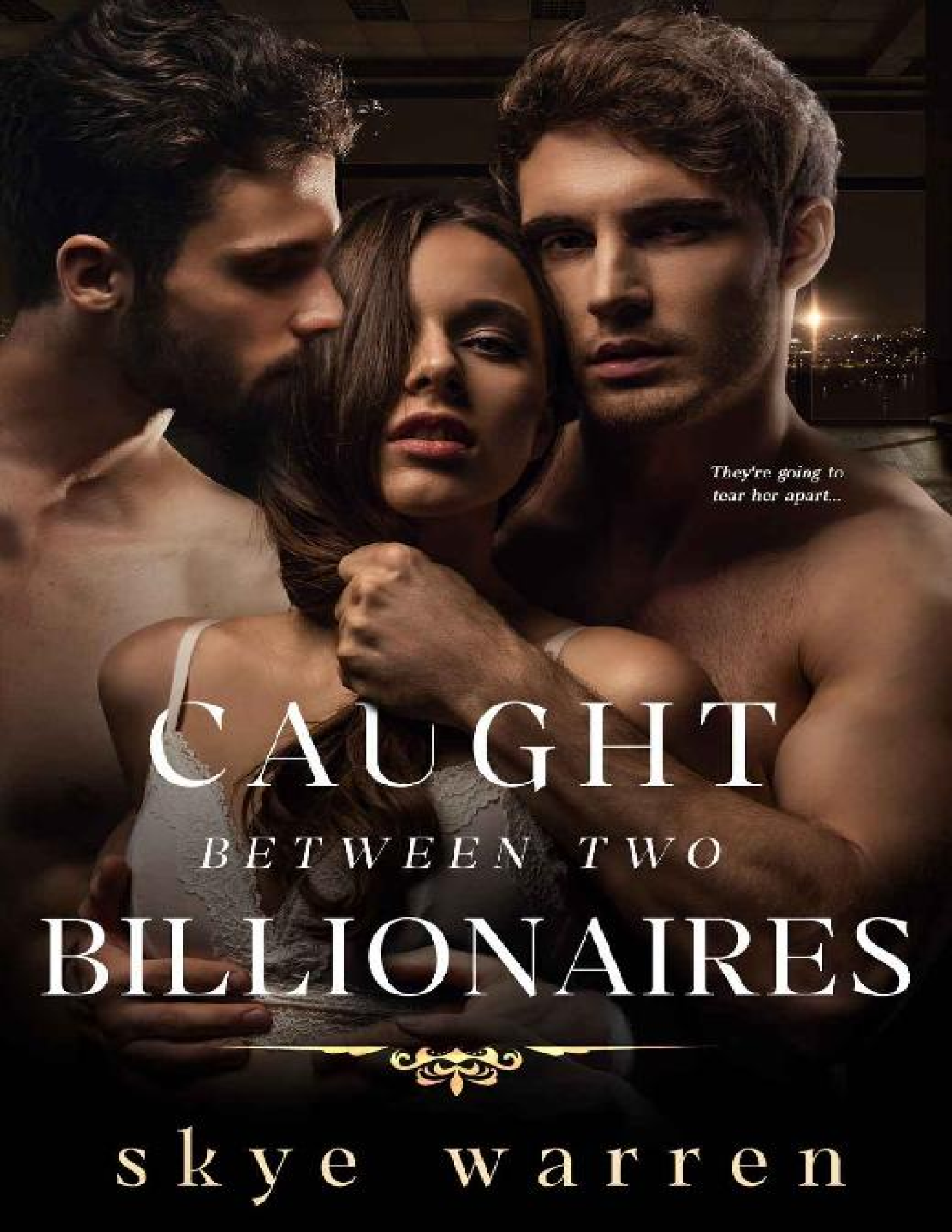

CAUGHT

BETWEEN TWO

BILLIONAIRES

skye warren

CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO BILLIONAIRES

by Skye Warren

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Excerpt from Mating Theory

Books by Skye Warren

About the Author

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TRUST FUND

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CHAPTER ONE

POOR LITTLE RICH GIRL

I LEARNED EARLY not to trust men or money. Both of them have a way of disappearing when you need them most. There must have been some hope left, though.

Because it's my stepbrother who breaks me completely.

Salt hits my tongue before the driver opens the door, splashing the sleek leather interior of the limo with watercolor light. This dock homes the most expensive boats in Boston, outfitting them with caviar and champagne before they set sail.

The driver's face is in shadow, sunshine forming a halo around him, but I already know he's expressionless. Like that time I sweet-talked my way into the flight attendant's lounge? He showed up in his black suit and bland smile, having searched the whole airport with security.

Like every part of my father's life, he's cold and predictable and expensive.

Gravel shifts beneath my sandals. I have to squint my eyes against the brightness. Seagulls swoop above me as I step onto the long deck, searching for their breakfast, completely oblivious to the thud of my heart against my ribs.

I would know which yacht belongs to Daddy even if I hadn't seen it before. It's the biggest one, the best one. The one that gleams the brightest, with *Liquid Asset* in bold letters.

The silhouettes of three people split the sunlight.

Three people, not one. Disappointment hitches my breath. What did I expect?

Last year Daddy's new wife got so drunk she threw her champagne flute in the air. It came down in a splash of pale liquid and bubbling despair. After the steward mopped up the broken crystal, once the wife had gone

belowdecks to sleep it off, Daddy sat looking out at the dark sea. I sat beside him. “Why?” I asked, unable to keep the question in. After so many years it came out. “Why do you keep getting married to these people?”

He had been a little drunk himself. Not enough to play volleyball with the drinkware, but enough that his eyes had gleamed with a distant sadness. He pulled me close, and I nestled against him the way I had as a little girl, breathing in the cedar-salt scent of him.

“I love your mother,” he said then, present tense. *He loves her.*

There shouldn’t have been enough of the wide-eyed little girl inside me to believe it meant my parents would get back together, not after ten years and even more spouses between them. They couldn’t even arrange my visits on spring break without an intermediary—me, of course. But maybe some part of me thought there wouldn’t be a new wife this year, after that confession.

Well, now I know for sure. There’s no chance of them being together, not even in the same room. But it would be nice if Daddy had stopped marrying his way through every divorcée in Boston’s upper crust. Like the limo that picks me up from the airport, there’s a new model every year.

Daddy smiles at me from the deck, and I can’t help the smile that meets his. Can’t help the little run I make down the rest of the deck before launching myself into his bear hug. We’re far from a happy family, but I always love seeing him. I may be fifteen years old, but the little girl inside me wears pigtails and wants to run to her daddy.

Even if it means putting up with the strangers he marries.

“How’s my girl?” he asks, tucking me into his side.

“Sleepy.” A guy in a rumpled suit had snored beside me the whole flight, which would have been more annoying if I hadn’t swiped his phone and read his e-mail using the plane’s Wi-Fi. Someone had a secret girlfriend in New York City. At least she used to be secret. A few clicks had changed that as we were flying over the Atlantic.

Guilt still knots my stomach, but then I imagine my mother as that man’s wife. More likely she would be the secret girlfriend. Men shouldn’t be allowed to hurt her so much.

“You can take a nap after brunch,” says the woman I was hoping wouldn’t speak to me.

“Harper,” Daddy says, giving my arm a secret squeeze. He’s never forgotten the time I yelled, *You aren’t my mommy.* Never mind that I was seven years old. “This is Louise Bardot. Louise, this is Harper. Isn’t she beautiful?”

I’m surprised I don’t get frostbite, that’s how chilly this woman’s smile is. “Everything you said about her is true, Graham. She’s an absolute doll.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” I say just to see her dark eyes flash with rage.

Daddy’s smart enough to run a Fortune 500 company, but he can’t figure out when a woman is bullshitting him. Or maybe he knows, because he steers me away from her. “There’s someone else I want you to meet. This is Christopher.”

There have been other boys. Other girls. Most of the time we ignore each other, having bigger problems in our broken rich-kid lives than the stepsibling of the month. Sometimes one of them will take a swipe at me, with sharp words or a surprise shove as we pass in the hallway. A preemptive strike, so I know better than to mess with them.

I don’t want to mess with them. They’ll be gone by next year.

There’s no reason Christopher should be different.

Except that he is.

Even in a burst of sunlight he manages to look like a shadow, with raven hair and onyx eyes. He’s taller than me, taller than Daddy. His arms solid and muscled beneath the thin cotton of his black T-shirt. He’s wearing jeans, technically, but nothing about him is casual. Not the way he holds himself, as if he needs to guard something—maybe himself. And definitely not the way he’s looking at me, intensity a physical brush against my skin, like he’s made of ocean and I’m sand, washed away, washed away, becoming smooth and pliable beneath him.

He inclines his head. “Your dad talks a lot about you.”

“He never mentioned you,” I say before I can stop myself. I would have remembered. *He looks like some kind of conquering warrior, like a knight from the old medieval days. The kind who would have defended the peasants, but who would also have demanded his due.*

Daddy makes a disapproving sound. “Harper.”

The corner of Christopher’s mouth turns up. “There’s not much to say.”

“Liar,” I say before I can stop myself. “I bet you’re top ten percent of your class.”

“Graduated valedictorian,” Daddy says, pride rich in his voice. “Now he’s in his first year at Emerson studying business with a 4.0 GPA. You could learn a thing or two from him.”

It’s really not surprising Daddy has a new wife every year. The only thing he knows how to do with the female of the species is make us mad. “He can get good grades, but can he paint a three-story Medusa on the wall of the gymnasium?”

A rueful laugh. “That little stunt cost me a brand-new science lab.”

Even two coats of thick white primer hadn’t completely covered the shape of her thick lips and wild snake hair, painted dark and angry in the small hours of the morning, using the folded-up accordion stands for scaffolding.

The new wife makes some kind of cooing sound, like a bird on the street, and Daddy goes to make her a drink. That leaves me and Christopher standing on the deck, the echo of his perfect GPA and my costly little stunt hanging in the air between us.

“Daddy seems to love you,” I say, unable to keep the venom from my voice.

He laughs softly, which infuriates me. “You’re one to talk.”

“He’s *my* dad. Of course he loves me.”

“Of course. That’s why you need to paint the gym to get him to notice you.”

Asshole. “You don’t know anything about me.”

“So you aren’t a poor little rich girl?”

There’s a twinge in my chest. “We both know you’ll be gone next year. I’ll never see you again, and you’ll never see me, so let’s just stay out of each other’s way for the next week, okay?”

“Sure you wouldn’t rather learn a thing or two from me?” he asks, mocking.

“If I want to know how to make enemies and alienate people, I’ll call you.”

He blinks, and I think for a minute that I may have actually struck a nerve. Then his eyes harden. “I’ll stay out of your way,” he says, his voice so cold it makes me shiver even as the sun beats its heavy blanket on my bare shoulders. It’s not the worst encounter I’ve ever had with a stepsibling,

but it’s the first time I think I started it. Apparently I’m not above lashing out first, if the boy in question is smart and handsome enough.

Though he isn’t really a boy, this one. His first year at Emerson College. Business school. No wonder Daddy loves him. He probably thinks he’s found his true heir, because his wild daughter isn’t going to take over the family empire. That will never be me, but I was right about one thing. Christopher will be gone next year. They always are.

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CHAPTER TWO

FAMILY MONEY

I MANAGE TO avoid him the rest of the day, napping after brunch and ignoring him at dinner.

Our cabins are on the same floor, below the galley and above the master bedroom where our parents sleep. Thankfully he keeps his word and leaves me alone, even stepping aside to let me pass when I head back to the observation deck at midnight. I suck in a breath to make extra sure no part of my body touches his.

Wind whips at my hair, salty and cool, as I step out of the hold.

I grasp the cold metal railing and let it ground me. Why does Christopher bother me so much? In my pocket there are a couple of joints and a lighter. I light myself something to calm down, because I would rather not know the answer to that question.

In a practiced move I swing my leg over the railing and pull myself up. This is my favorite place to sit, from the time I was six years old and my nanny would fall asleep in the room next door. I can pretend the yacht isn't here, pretend it's just me and the ocean, rocking and rocking. The movement bounces me softly, my ass against the metal bar.

Weed makes it better, more like a meditation. The more drags I take, the more it feels like the whole world is rocking, and maybe I'm the only one sitting still.

"Do you have a death wish?"

The question comes out of the darkness behind me, and I jump, almost slipping off the rail. I manage to catch myself, clutching the metal bar with one hand and the joint with another. Survival and sanity, the two most important things in life. "Do you always hide in the shadows?"

"Whenever possible."

I snort, which is a friendlier sound than I want to make with him. “That doesn’t surprise me.”

He takes a step forward and holds out his hand. “You’re making me nervous.”

“That’s kind of my standard operating procedure,” I say, ignoring his hand and taking another drag. “You get good grades. I get into trouble.”

“So the death wish thing…”

“Pretty accurate,” I say, wishing he would go belowdecks. And wishing he wouldn’t. There’s something complicated about him, the way he makes me want opposite things at the same time. “I don’t want to die, but I want to live. People call that having a death wish.”

With clear reluctance he pulls his hand back and settles his arms on the railing a few feet away from my ass. His eyes are trained on the dark horizon, but I can tell he’s still watching me. “This is what living means? Falling into the ocean with no one around to rescue you?”

I point at the choppy water. “The captain dropped anchor before dinner. We aren’t even moving. What do you think is going to happen?”

“Head trauma. Hypothermia. Drowning.”

“For your information I’ve been coming up here by myself for a decade. No one ever comes with me. Haven’t fallen overboard once.”

“Then statistically speaking, you’re overdue.”

“Wow, you really are my dad’s heir.” Part of me is glad to have company on one of my nightly reveries. The other part of me feels the distinct intrusion of having a stranger in my space.

“What?”

“Go back down and play with your calculator.”

There’s a pained pause. “I can’t. Not when I know you’re up here, getting high and hanging off a two-hundred-foot yacht. If something happened to you—”

“Nothing’s going to happen to me.” The sea takes that moment to bump bump bump me, my ass a full two inches off the rail with every pull of the yacht. I’m holding on tight so I don’t go flying, not forward or backward, my perch secure.

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather paint a mythical creature on the observation deck?”

“I know you’re making fun of me right now, but no. I don’t have enough paint for that.”

“Can you just sit on a deck chair like a normal person?”

“Do I look normal to you? Don’t answer that.”

There’s a flash of white teeth. That’s how I know he’s smiling even though the rest of his face is in shadow. The smile is there one second and gone the next, as temporary as his presence in my life but strangely momentous. “I’m sorry I called you a poor little rich girl.”

“Are you just saying that so I’ll get off the railing?”

“Is it working?”

“No, but I appreciate the effort.”

And strangely that was true. Not many people have ever cared enough to follow me up to the deck at midnight, to make sure I didn’t fall into the ocean. Definitely not one of the stepsiblings, who would probably have given me a little push to get rid of the competition for the inheritance.

It makes me want to prove myself to him, to convince him that I’m worth saving even if he apparently already thinks so. “Medusa wasn’t for attention. I mean, she was, but not because I wanted Daddy to pay for a new science lab.”

“Then why’d you do it?”

“This girl got roofied at a party.”

He sucks in a breath. “Harper.”

“It wasn’t me.” I glance sideways to see his black eyes staring at me, so hard and fierce it almost seems possible that he can go back in time and rip the balls off a frat boy. What would he say if he knew my past? “It wasn’t me, I swear. I wasn’t even friends with her.”

After a searching look, he turns back to the ocean. “A girl got roofied.”

“Everyone knew about it, like the next day. One of the football players slipped it in her drink, and then the football team, I mean the *entire* football team, took advantage of her.”

“Christ.”

“They suspended the guy who brought the roofie to the party, one of the players, but not the one who gave it to her—the quarterback. And not the rest of the team. A big game was coming up. You can’t play a game without all your players.”

He’s quiet a moment. “I’m sorry.”

For that I pass him the joint and watch while he takes a drag, his lips touching where mine have been. “The honor society set up a protest and everyone who went got suspended. And after all that there wasn’t a single word about the party in the local papers. The morning before the game there was going to be a big pep rally with the cheerleaders and the school’s donors. The press was going to be there. They had the janitors stay late shining the floor. Real press, from a newspaper that wouldn’t take money not to print the story.”

He passes the joint back to me. “So you painted Medusa.”

“She was raped by Poseidon, who so happened to be the school mascot.” I have to blink away stupid tears. I don’t know why it would make me cry now, when it didn’t before. Not when I had to walk down the hallway next to boys who would hurt me if they had the chance. When I had to wear my skirt a certain length and my hair a certain way, as if I was the reason they were cruel.

“Did everyone turn to stone?”

I look down at the water, where I can see more white crests against the ink. It looks rough for a calm night. “The reporter took pictures and started asking questions, but he didn’t get the whole story that day. A week later the story was printed. The entire team was suspended. The headmaster was ready to suspend me too, but Daddy flew down and smoothed it over.”

“The science lab.”

“Which means I’m no better than those players, using my family money.”

His voice is soft enough I have to strain to hear it over the murmur of the waves. “You’re plenty better, Harper. Don’t you ever doubt that. You’re fucking gold.”

My heart skips a beat. I should know better than to fall for a line, but this boy has me messed up. I’m caught by his eyes, which are somehow darker than the sea beneath us and infinitely more deep. I’m drowning there; that must be the reason I don’t feel it coming.

Lurch.

Dip.

My hand finds cold metal, and I have a moment of sweet relief—until the slickness of sea spray coats my palm and I lose my grip. For a moment

I’m suspended in air, my gaze still locked on his, my shock reflected in that black mirror.

And then I’m falling.

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CHAPTER THREE

DEADWEIGHT

MY PARENTS BOTH tell the story of when I was two years old. One minute I was standing on the deck. The next I had fallen into the Massachusetts Bay. They both had a heart attack, or so the story goes, until they ran to the edge and saw me swimming around like a fish, more comfortable in water than on land.

I'm not sure whether I really learned to swim quite that naturally or why I was left to toddle around the docks without someone holding my hand, but I do love to swim. I've even jumped off the deck of the yacht into the water, too impatient to climb down the long swim steps.

I'm falling backward and twisted, unable to see how far I'm falling. Unable to see anything—but I can feel it, the slam of the surface at my back, the shock of freezing cold. And then it surrounds me, heavy weight dragging me down. The air leaves me in a rush; by the time I can take another breath, I'm fully submerged.

It's pitch-black, impossible to know which way is up. Any direction I go could be taking me deeper. My throat burns with salt. Panic threatens to overwhelm me. My whole body clenches, fighting the instinct to breathe in deep and fill my lungs with water.

Something touches my side, and I squirm away in terror. Even stoned and in shock I remember there might be sharks. What if they heard me splashing? What if they sense my fear?

Except there's a grip on my arm—a hand, not teeth. It drags me up in a whoosh of water, and we break the surface together.

The cold night air has never felt so good in my lungs. I gasp and gasp, unwilling to stop breathing after even a few seconds without it, unable to calm down.

Something is shoved under my arms. The white and red of a life preserver. Christopher must have thrown one down before he jumped in after me. In a kaleidoscope of stars the world comes into focus. The water, lapping at me like a living thing. Christopher, his dark hair wet, his grip on my wrist firm as he tows us toward the yacht. And the boat itself, waves drawing intermittent shadows across the white bow.

It might have been ten years before we reach the bottom of the swim steps. Or maybe only ten minutes. I'm deadweight on the life preserver, unable to kick even once to help make progress.

"Can you climb?" Christopher shouts.

I stare at him, unable to process the words. The cold has done something to my body, made me sluggish and stiff. It's done the same thing to my brain.

"Let's get you through the middle," he says, reaching for the life ring. "I'll make sure you're secure and then go for help."

Sudden panic is enough to jolt me out of my shock. "No."

"It will only take a minute."

He thinks I'm worried about being left alone in the water. More than that I'm worried about the disappointment on Daddy's face. "I can climb," I say, my voice shaky and thin.

Christopher stares at me for a moment, and when he speaks, his voice is softer. "He won't be mad at you. You should hear the way he talks about you when you're not there."

That's exactly why I can't let him know I was smoking a joint and falling overboard. He wants me to be like Christopher—to be the valedictorian and go to business school. That's something I'll never be able to do for him, but at least I can spare him this. "Please."

"Fuck," he mutters.

In that moment I realize he already knows this will be a secret. Our secret. Because he didn't follow procedure. He should have shouted for help and hit the emergency button first. And he definitely shouldn't have jumped in after me, not without someone else on deck to pull us both back up. An unbroken sky rises from the metal railing above us. The night is quiet except for our fast breathing and the lap of the water. "Thank you," I whisper.

“I swear to God,” he says darkly, “if you fall and die, I’ll kill you myself.”

That would make me laugh if I were capable of doing anything other than pant. He makes me go first, though I’m not sure how he would manage to catch me if I fell. If there’s one thing I know by now, it’s that he would try. So I focus on each rung with every ounce of determination in me, grip the textured metal and pray there’s enough muscle left inside me to hold on. There are a thousand steps up the side of the yacht. A million of them. It’s my own personal journey to the promised land, and it tests my determination with every aching pull.

When I reach the top, I push myself through the railing and collapse onto the deck.

A warm body tumbles beside me, but I can’t look sideways. There’s only the stars, unblinking. Then a face appears above me. Christopher, looking wet and strong and grim. “We should go back to shore. The fall. The cold. You should have a doctor look at you.”

“N-n-no.”

“Harper. You’re freezing.”

There’s no way to argue that point, not when I’m shaking so hard my teeth are chattering. I think that’s a good sign. I read that somewhere. It means the body is warm enough to shiver, but I can’t get the words out through the violent movement.

He curses again and disappears from my view. I close my eyes in quiet despair. He’s gone to get Daddy, and there’s nothing I can do to stop him. The week we would have spent at sea, now we’ll spend it in some fancy emergency room even though I’m fine.

Not enough time has passed when hands force their way under me. Then I’m lifted, tucked close to a body as wet as mine but so much warmer. Christopher carries me belowdecks, turning carefully to the side so I don’t bump against the narrow walls.

He lays me down on my bed, and my arms are made of lead. My legs might as well be anvils, that’s how useful they would be if I were in the water right now. I’m helpless in front of this person who should be my enemy. *Poor little rich girl,* he called me, and I want to cry and rage because he’s right about me.

His hands move to the button of my jeans, and I suck in a breath. My mind was on sharks and freezing water, but now I'm thinking about roofies. I'm thinking about a girl who can't protect herself. About Poseidon and Medusa.

"Christopher," I whisper, though I'm not sure what I'm asking.

He glares at me, his eyes black with a strange heat. "You have two options. Either I call your dad here or I make sure you're warm. You pick."

You pick. In those two words he restores my faith in him—strange, because I wouldn't have said I had faith at all. I know I need to get out of my wet clothes, and my body is too hurt by the freezing cold to be useful. "Don't look."

After a beat he nods, facing away from me. Then he turns off the dim bedside lamp, bathing us only in moonlight from the port window. He undresses me with clumsy efficiency, his fingers clearly numb and struggling against the waterlogged fabric. I feel somehow colder by the time he's done, the damp clothes in a heap on the floor, my naked skin exposed to the room.

And then I watch while he undresses himself, faster and rougher with his body than he was with mine. His clothes land on top of mine, and then he pulls us both under the covers.

He's naked. The thought is enough to make me blush, even when there shouldn't be any energy in my body for such an act. But he holds me close, tight enough I can't make out where his male parts meet my female parts. There are only two bodies here, clinging together for warmth, creating a little cocoon. Exhaustion makes my eyelids heavy.

"One of my mom's husbands got into bed with me once."

Every part of his body becomes stiff. "What the fuck?"

"It was bad. Not like this. This is nice."

"I swear to God, Harper."

"It's okay," I say, the words slurred together. "I told Mom the next day and we moved out of his mansion, even though it was really nice. He owned this big job website. Don't tell Daddy. He would freak out even though it was a long time ago."

He holds me tighter, his face pressed to my hair. "I'm not going to touch you. I'm only staying here until you don't feel like an ice cube, and then I'm moving to the chair."

“Thanks,” I say, the word coming out long and slow.

He sighs. “Go to sleep, Harper. And for the love of God, don’t die.”

A death wish, he’d called it. “Want to live,” I mumble before the dreams take me down. It’s only later that I think that everything changed that night. Not because I fell into the bay or because he pulled me out. Because I confessed that in my sleepy-shocked state. It set us on the course to ruin, what made him the white knight to my damsel in distress.

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CHAPTER FOUR

TEMPORARY

I WAKE UP gasping for air, a nightmare of being submerged in water pressing against my consciousness. My muscles ache as I stretch in the bunk, looking up at familiar knots in the ceiling. What the hell did I dream about? There's grit in my eyes as if I spent all evening at a bonfire, drinking cheap beer from a plastic cup and ignoring the frat boys on the beach.

My mind moves slow and careful. I'm not sure I want the memory that happens next, but it comes anyway. Not a nightmare. Not a dream. I fell overboard last night.

And Christopher Bardot saved me.

That would be shocking, but not as shocking as the memory of him naked in the moonlight, climbing into bed, his warm skin flush against mine. He's gone now, enough that I would think it really could have been a dream. Except for the faint scent of him that remains, something woodsy and male that managed to survive a dip in the Atlantic.

My phone rings from the nightstand, my mother's picture flashing on the screen. It's a photo I took when she was laughing at the beach and didn't think I was watching her. Completely different than the beauty queen smile she uses when looking at a camera. There's a bittersweet sensation whenever I think about her when I'm with Daddy, a feeling of betrayal I can't shake for loving him even though he hates her so much.

"Hey, Mom."

"You didn't call to say you got there safely," she says, a small pout in her voice.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I should have texted at least."

"That's okay. I'm sure you're busy there."

That's my opening to tell her about Daddy's new wife. She used to scoop every detail out of me like I was a melon, hollowed out and left dry.

“Mostly I’ve been sleeping.”

“Are you still in bed?” she asks, laughing a little. “Me too.”

That makes me smile. “You should be relaxing. You’re a free woman. Stay out late. Go to a party. You don’t have a kid at home to take care of.”

“I don’t think I’ve had to take care of you since you were eight.”

That’s probably true. I was the one who brought her breakfast and her medicine in the morning. I signed my own permission slips and called the driver when my art club meeting ended.

“How is he?” she asks, her voice soft and a little sad.

“He’s good. Same old Daddy.”

“And his… family?”

“I’m not sure. His new wife seems okay. She mostly just ignores me, which is fine. She has a son, though. He’s… older.”

She must sense something in my words, because her tone changes. “How much older? He isn’t being a bully, is he? Or worse?”

“It’s nothing like that,” I promise her, because I wouldn’t put it past her to fly out to Logan International by tonight if I didn’t reassure her.

She felt terrible about the job-website man. He’d needed to get drunk to come into my bedroom, which means his reflexes were slow. I ran out and woke up Mom, who had us out of the mansion and in a motel room by morning.

“Christopher’s nice, actually. Nicer than I expected.”

A pause. “Don’t get too close, Harper. It’s only temporary.”

I can’t blame her for the warning. She knows all too well how temporary being the wife of Graham St. Claire can be. Theirs had been a whirlwind relationship, the kind that every man and woman envied. By all accounts, even their own, they had been in love.

And then something had happened. To this day I still don’t know what.

Now they hate each other. It scares me when I think about it, how two people can go from love to hate so quickly. It scares me enough that I try *not* to think about it. About the way Daddy could have given her enough money to be set for life, it would have been pennies to him, but he denied her everything that wasn’t court-ordered out of spite. The child support they negotiated was contingent on a third party auditing her bank account to make sure every cent of it goes to my care. If she eats a Snickers bar purchased from his check, he could sue.

If that's what happens to people in love, I don't want any part of it.

I find Daddy at the breakfast table, the newspaper propped open like I knew it would be. He's not content without reading three newspapers every morning, even when we're on a trip. It comes ferried to us via a speedboat at five a.m., along with fresh supplies because God knows what we would do without catch-of-the-day lobster for dinner every night.

"Morning," he says without looking up.

I dig in the pile for the Art & Style section, like I always do. Other kids may have read Garfield, but I've always been a museum opening kind of girl. "Good morning."

A chocolate chip pancake appears in front of me, the butter melting in a delicious puddle. I'm a continent away from our apartment in LA, but it might as well be a different planet. I don't have to use my lunch money to tip the bellman so word doesn't get back that we're flat broke. Don't have to work an evening shift at the deli down the block to pay the bills.

"How's your mother?" The question comes in that neutral voice, so without inflection that it conveys everything. The way they end up screaming at each other on the phone. The very careful way that Daddy agrees to pay for my prep school tuition and room-and-board fees in a private suite—but nothing else. On that point he stands firm.

I once told my friend in middle school, because she didn't understand how the daughter of a billionaire couldn't afford to take the school trip to France. *I would be pissed*, she said, sounding scandalized. *Like he's trying to control you with money, even though he has so much.* It doesn't make me angry, because I know he has terrible and complicated feelings about money.

Terrible and complicated feelings about money, like my mother.

It's something we pass down through generations, like a grandfather clock that chimes every time your bank account rises or falls. A legacy and a family curse. I'm not naive enough to think I'll manage to escape that.

"Good," I say, because we decided a long time ago, when I was only ten, that it was me and her against the world. If I tell Daddy what it's like when she's between husbands, how it feels to be hungry or cold, he'll take me away from her.

"And how's school?"

“I’m working on a sculpture for the spring art festival. My teacher said it’s inspired and strange and sinister. That’s a direct quote.”

Daddy gives me a fond look, mixed with the kind of bemusement he’s always given me. It would be so much easier if I loved the stock market or international law. “Christopher told me about last night.”

Panic squeezes my throat. That bastard.

Maybe it’s not fair to get mad at someone who saved my life, but still. He seemed like he was going to be cool about it. I’m two seconds away from saying, *He took a drag of the weed too!* Before reason prevails. Never give them eight words when two will suffice.

“He did?”

“I had half a mind to wake you up, make sure you get on the East Coast schedule right away. Christopher told me he heard you playing music until late, so we decided to let you sleep in.”

For a second I’m struck by the horror of Daddy walking in on me and Christopher, both naked and tangled beneath the sheets. That’s only superseded by the horror of him knowing that I fell overboard last night. Thank God someone woke up early—and that someone appears at the table, looking annoyingly well rested compared to the bags that must be under my eyes.

“Are you a vampire?” I demand as he pours himself a cup of coffee.

“Don’t mind her,” Daddy warns in a tone that says teenage girls are stupid. I’m hardly the person to disprove that, but it has way more to do with changing prep schools every single year than the fact that I have a vagina. It’s easier to let everyone think I don’t care.

“I have been known to order my steak rare,” Christopher offers.

I nod in satisfaction. “You have that whole old-soul thing going on. No wonder you’re getting straight A’s. You probably wrote the textbook when you were a professor. And now you have to get a new degree as someone else or people will get suspicious.”

“The typo on page seventy-eight haunts me to this day,” he says in a grave voice.

Daddy stares at me like I’m speaking a different language. “I don’t suppose it factors into this conversation that vampires aren’t real?”

“Not with that attitude, they aren’t.”

A slow smile spreads on Christopher’s face, and my breath stutters. It’s the kind of smile so rare and precious it could be sold at Sotheby’s. *Quality,* the auctioneer would say, standing in front of the well-dressed crowd, *in its raw, natural state.* The world is going to want that smile. It’s going to polish him into a sharp geometric shape, hard and gleaming. And it will be worth more money than God.

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CHAPTER FIVE

THE BEST CURTSY

IT'S NOT UNTIL that night that I find Christopher alone, head bent over a thick textbook at his desk, the lamp casting shadows on his furrowed brow. It softens me more than it should, seeing him working hard when no one's watching. "This a bad time?" I ask, leaning against the doorframe.

He turns to face me, his expression inscrutable. "Would it stop you if I said yes?"

I pretend to consider this. "You *did* save my life, but I think that only means I have to save your life back. Or maybe give you my firstborn child? They skipped this part in my etiquette class, but I'm pretty sure I don't have to respect your time either way."

"You took an etiquette class?"

"Standard operating procedure for any debutante."

He shakes his head as if bewildered. "I shouldn't be surprised."

"My curtsy is literally the best curtsy, thank you very much."

"Not that you're a debutante. Just—" He waves a hand at the cabin, the whole yacht. "This whole thing. It's kind of insane, if you don't mind me saying so."

That draws me farther into the room. I perch on the end of his bed, which is still neatly made after turndown service. "You didn't grow up with the silver-spoon thing?"

He snorts. "The only thing silver we had was a ten-year-old Toyota Camry."

"Then how did your mom bag my dad?" I say the question without thinking. There are too many wives in too many years for me to treat the marriages as anything sacred. Or love, for that matter. Daddy doesn't even bother inviting me to the ceremony, though I never really know if that says more about the women or about me.

Christopher shrugs like he doesn't take offense. "Mom came from money, but when she married my dad, they cut her off. He was a hard worker. A regular office job. A 401K. That kind of thing. Then he got cancer, and I… I don't really begrudge her this. It's what she wants."

"That's very understanding of you."

"It's not exactly a hardship," he says. "Even if I do have to dive into cold water."

"Thank you," I say softly, meaning it more than words can convey. It's a situation plenty of boys would have taken advantage of. The kind of boys who bring roofies to parties and get away with things because they can. The only kind of boys I've known until now.

He shakes his head, pushing aside my gratitude. "You wouldn't have died. Probably."

"I'm glad you're good at the whole numbers business thing, because a career in motivational speaking is out of the question for you."

He leans forward and opens his mouth, as if he's going to say something important. And then he stops. When he finally speaks, it's something I never would have expected. "You're smart," he says, and I laugh.

"What?"

"You're smart, but you don't want anyone to know."

"I'm *not* smart, as my grades can definitely attest. We can't all be valedictorian, can we?"

He laughs a little. "You are so full of shit."

"Excuse me? My report cards are very clear on this issue. I am the absolute best at failing. If there were grades given for failing, I would get straight A's."

When I was in third grade, the teacher called my mother in for a conference and showed her my math workbook. I had used the numbers like an abstract paint-by-numbers, turning the pages into stained-glass drawings of flowers and puppies and this one grim reaper with its scythe made out of a column of fractions. It's not that I can't add or subtract or even do advanced derivatives. It's that my mind will flit away like a butterfly in a meadow filled with flowers.

"Okay," Christopher says. "But I know the truth."

Frustration makes me huff, which is a lot safer than letting myself smile at him. "Fine, but I know the truth about you."

One dark eyebrow rises. “What’s that?”

The insight hits me with the same clarity as I saw every page in that workbook, the possibility rising up out of the framework. “This whole thing. The insanity of the yacht and the silver spoon, you want it so bad it hurts. That’s why you study so hard. Because you want this life as bad as your mom, but you’re working for it in a different way.”

The silence descends on us, as heavy and cold as the water. His throat works. “That obvious, huh?”

My brain, usually good at comebacks, falls suddenly silent. There are things I could say to ease the moment: *I didn’t mean it, I’m sure it’s not true*. But those would be lies. We’re sitting in the cabin with only nakedness between us, the same way we were last night. “It doesn’t mean anything bad about you.” At least that much is true.

He laughs without humor. “It doesn’t mean I’m a greedy asshole?”

“Oh, for sure, you’re definitely a greedy asshole. Who isn’t? Everyone wants money. Very few are willing to work as hard as you to earn it.”

“Listen,” he says, seeming uncertain for once. “What you said about that guy. The one who owned the job website. The one who—”

“I shouldn’t have told you that,” I say, my cheeks burning like fire. “It was a moment of weakness. Which I seem to be having around you with unfortunate frequency.”

“Maybe we should tell your dad. He could make sure that—”

“Absolutely not. No offense, but you’ve been my stepbrother for like a month. You don’t know the history in my family. That guy is gone, and the best thing to do is leave it alone.”

My parents alternately hate each other and love each other, but that isn’t what breaks us. It’s the money that fractures us into a million sharp pieces.

Like the men in my life, money is only temporary.

And if I never want either of them, I won’t be disappointed when they’re gone.

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CHAPTER SIX

ADMISSIONS ESSAY

Dear Christopher,

My mother married a German count, which is exactly as pretentious as it sounds. We're moving to Frankfurt and that means a boarding school with new rules and lesson plans where I'm already going to be behind. I hope you don't mind that I'm writing you, because I know we're not technically related anymore.

PS. Who's going to dive in and rescue me on spring break?

Dear Harper,

Thank you for writing to me, even if we aren't related anymore. If it's any consolation, you feel as much a sister to me as you did before. Which is to say, not much. I'm sorry to hear about the new boarding school. I hope they have lots of paint.

PS. Don't sit on the rail at midnight, and whatever you do, don't die.

Dear Christopher,

Germany is cold and guess what? They speak German. It's hard to make friends when the only things I know how to say are "Yes, ma'am" and "Which way is the bathroom?" I'm super popular.

You will be pleased to know that while I did smoke a joint on the railing, I had my phone in my pocket in a waterproof case. So even if I had fallen in, which I didn't, I could have called the yacht's concierge line and gotten rescued. Three cheers for technology.

PS. My new stepbrother wears twenty pounds of cologne and has a goatee.

Dear Harper,

It’s kind of strange how different the second year is from the first. In the freshman classes they kept talking about weeding people out (which doesn’t mean what you think it does) and how hard it would be, but I felt like I had a handle on things. Now they’re acting like it’s straightforward and I’m staying up late every night banging my head against these textbooks.

I feel like I’m drowning here.

PS. If I had written this textbook, I deserve to be shot. With a silver bullet.

Dear Christopher,

You have an amazing brain, which is something I can state without any hesitation because you said I was smart—so obviously you have a clear and accurate understanding of the world. Plus, Daddy keeps talking about how you’re going to do great things.

And I’m not just saying that because you’re a vampire who wrote a shitty textbook.

PS. For the love of God, don’t die.

Dear Harper,

Finals damn near killed me, but I kept your letter on my desk. I figured as long as you had ordered me not to die, I had no choice but to listen. That’s how saving your life works, right? I never took etiquette class, so I’m just guessing here.

Your dad gave a speech at commencement and took me out to dinner. He said you were doing some kind of big art exhibit in New York City. That's incredible.

PS. Why didn't you tell me about it?

Dear Christopher,

That's exactly how saving my life works, and congratulations on graduating!!! The only reason I applied to Smith College is my art professor. Her work is amazing. In my admissions essay I wrote about the Medusa painting. I thought they only made interns read those things, but Professor Mills found out and asked me to do an exhibit.

I thought about vandalizing the school and tearing out the wall of the gym, but shipping rates are ridiculous. So instead I'm doing a series of canvas paintings about the myth.

PS. I'm enclosing an invitation to the exhibit in case you can make it.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

BREAKING AND ENTERING

IT SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE that Christopher would spend his weekend traveling to New York City for a girl he knew for a week a couple years ago. The fact that we kept in touch felt surreal, almost a dream, like the night I fell into the bay. That we were stepsiblings, if only for a few months, made it more strange, not less. I couldn't be sure what I wanted from him, not even in the privacy of my mind. What were the odds a man like him would be interested in a girl like me?

I never told Daddy that Christopher and I wrote letters. At first I wasn't sure what he would think about it. And then it became weird to mention, as if I'd been keeping a secret. That's what the letters were—a secret. An escape.

A lifeline, like the red and white round buoy.

The exhibit becomes bigger than I thought it would, once my mom finds out about it. She invites every friend and enemy she ever knew in New York City, and the whole thing blows up. It would have been nice to have a small show filled mostly with the art scene, people who would appreciate the work more than the champagne.

But I accepted my mother's ambitions in society a long time ago. As Christopher said once, *It's not exactly a hardship. Even if I do have to dive into cold water.*

All the pieces for the show are packed into foam-padded crates stacked along the foyer of the penthouse suite. Daddy's paying the bill, of course. Mom's last divorce gave her the smallest payout yet, which had less to do with a prenup and more to do with the man's failure in the stock market. Only the main piece remains propped against the window, surrounded by tubes of paint and a disarray of brushes. I can't seem to stop myself from

dabbling at it, even though I've lost any perspective on whether I'm making it better or worse.

Mom breezes from her bedroom in a casual blouse of ivory silk and skinny jeans, the perpetual cloud of Chanel achingly familiar. "Oh, baby, are you still working on it? It's perfect, you know."

I twirl a dry paintbrush in my fingers. "This is the one they'll write about."

She comes and gives me a kiss on the forehead. "I'm so proud of you. Everyone is going to be blown away by your talent."

Despite our weird money issues, I love my parents. Mom always supports me, and even if she can't settle down to save her life, that only makes her human. Daddy is puzzled by everything I do, but he's coming to the exhibit. Cancelled a business trip to Japan to be here.

The fact that they'll be in the same room for two hours is cause for concern, but at least neither of them are married to someone else right now. That makes it ten percent less likely to devolve into a screaming match by the end.

I sigh, flopping back onto the oversize leather couch. "Don't worry about me. I just need to stare at this for approximately twenty-four more hours, and then I never have to see it again."

Mom checks her lipstick in a gold-leaf mirror. It's already perfect, of course. "Are you sure? I can stay in tonight. Sandra and the girls will understand."

"No, you should definitely go out. We haven't been in NYC in forever." It was back to LA after the relationship with the German count ended, and thank God for small favors.

She smiles. "You're the best daughter."

"I really am." I blow her a kiss. "Now go have fun. That's an order."

After putting a few smudges of Atomic Red on my cheeks, she floats out the door. It will be good for her to meet her girlfriends, even if they are a pack of conniving hyenas. She hasn't been this excited since before Robert the day trader asked her to marry him.

And besides, it wouldn't help for her to hover over me. I really am going to drive myself crazy in the final hours leading up to the exhibit. This piece will get auctioned off at the end of the night, and the money will go to a charity to help victims of rape and abuse. There's every chance that

Daddy will be the highest bidder, not because he likes the painting but because money is the only way he knows how to show his support of my weird interests. Even knowing that, I can't help but obsess over this piece.

The other pieces show Medusa in various stages of her life; with her three Gorgon sisters, beautiful and pristine, being held down by Poseidon, being cursed by Athena for the "crime" of being raped in her temple, her hair turned to snakes, her face turning every man to stone. You would think that's enough tragedy for the Greeks, but then they had to behead her.

The other pieces tell the story of her life and death, but the centerpiece of the show is a simple portrait like the one that appeared on the wall of the gymnasium, sprung from my rage and fear and helplessness, the look in her eyes mirrored in every girl who walked the hallways with me.

I had only a few hours between when the custodians went home and when school staff arrived in the morning, which meant I had to work fast—and that was good; the time limit gave me the intensity I needed to complete the piece. The painting in front of me is good. Maybe even my best work, but there's something missing. A sense of necessity. That I would have painted the wall of that gymnasium or died trying.

Maybe it's impossible for something created to exhibit to match that intensity.

Or maybe I've just failed at art in a spectacularly public fashion.

My phone vibrates with a text from across the room. It's probably Avery, my best friend from Smith College, who's staying at a hotel in Times Square. If she offers to get drunk with me, that's how I'll be spending tonight, I already know.

It's Christopher.

Two words and suddenly I can't breathe. Is he texting me to wish me good luck the night before my big show? Does he even remember that it's tomorrow? Or is this some random Christopher in a city that must have thousands of them, who somehow got my number and is now going to send me an unsolicited dick pic?

My hands are shaking, which I prefer to attribute to nerves about the upcoming show than about the fact that Christopher is texting me for the first time. *Heyyyy, stranger.*

There's a full two minutes, during which my heart beats approximately twelve thousand times and I think of ten terrifying ways he might have been

injured after texting me.

I'm at the airport about to get in a cab. Do you have plans for dinner or are you going to an uber hip artist spot where they drink kombucha and complain about capitalism?

A smile spreads over my face before I can stop it. He's here in New York City. For me. And he's possibly inviting me to dinner? The suite suddenly becomes a fun-house mirror, everything in all different shapes, leaving me dizzy and out of breath.

Actually I'm in my hotel room, thinking about slashing this painting, but they only sent up a butter knife with room service. After a moment I send another text, *You can come hang out if you want. There's no kombucha but we can raid the minibar.*

No vandalism until I get there.

I might have a sensitive artist's soul, but I'm still a girl.

A girl with an unfortunate, painful, and totally inappropriate crush.

Which means I spring up and raid my closet for something other than a paint-splattered tank top and ripped shorts. I pull a brush through my hair, which is about all I can do before falling back on my bed, wondering why I want to impress someone I barely know. It's not like I've never been on a date before. I've been on lots of dates, with frat boys who think I'm going to fawn over them for knowing how to kick a ball or making a reference to Kant. Whatever.

I don't think Christopher has ever tried to impress me. I also don't think he wants to get me into bed. At least, he had me naked once and didn't try anything. So where does that leave us? I'm not fifteen anymore, if that had ever been what kept him away from me. I'm eighteen now, and ironically more fully aware of my cluelessness as a sexual being than I was back then.

It's another hour until he knocks on the door.

And I definitely don't run to the door or stand in front of it for two whole minutes, trying to catch my breath and pretend like I haven't been waiting for him since he sent that text. Since before that, if I'm totally honest. Since I sent the invitation, pretending I didn't care if he ignored it.

Since he dived in after me through the water, the first person to meet me where I was instead of where they wanted me to be.

When I open the door, he looks rumpled and travel-worn and so handsome after being on a plane that it's indecent. "Hey, stranger," he says

softly, his eyes a sleek ocean surface at night. It's been three years since I've seen him, and he looks harder and softer at the same time.

There are lots of ways I can say hello to him that will make me seem mature. Instead I throw my arms around his broad shoulders and press my face into his neck, breathing him in. "It's the worst thing I've ever made, and everyone's going to look at it, and I want to die."

He stands stock-still for a moment, as if too surprised to even move. Then his arms wrap around me. He holds me like the whole world could batter us from every side and we would still be safe clinging together like this. He holds me like I'm running out of air and he knows the way to the surface. "It will be okay, Harper. I promise you."

There are embarrassing tears on my lashes when I pull back. "This would be less humiliating if I were throwing an artistic tantrum and throwing things. Crying is so pedestrian."

"I'm sure that vase would make a satisfying crash," he offers gently.

The weird thing is I know he would let me throw it, if that's what I needed. Or cry on his shoulder if that's what I need instead. "Come inside," I say, dragging him by the hand so he has to scramble to grab the handle of his carry-on before the heavy hotel door slams behind him.

I need a minute to compose myself, so I drop his hand and head for the minibar. There are tiny bottles of wine and rum and vodka. "Do you know how to make drinks?" I ask over the *clink* of little glass containers. "The only things I know how to make have the ingredients in the name, like rum and Coke or a whiskey sour."

"Sour isn't an ingredient," he says, sounding distracted.

"Of course it is," I say, glancing back at him. And then freezing when I see he's standing directly in front of Medusa, staring at her like she has the secrets of the universe in her eyes. "Oh."

"Goddamn, Harper. This is… there aren't words."

My throat suddenly feels dry, and I have to force myself to swallow. I feel strangely buoyant as I stand and cross the few yards between us. "Disappointing? You can tell me."

He looks at me like I'm insane. "This is incredible. There's so much talent, but it's the way it makes you feel her rage and her vulnerability that's incredible. It belongs in the museums next to O'Keeffe and Kahlo, and even then people would stop and stare at this."

“I didn’t know you knew about art,” I say lamely.

He shrugs, looking embarrassed. “I don’t, but I spent my free credits taking Ancient Greek Symbolism and History of Portraiture and the Female Gaze after you told me about Medusa.”

My mouth must be hanging open in a way that’s decidedly unladylike, but he couldn’t have surprised me more if he said he was going to give away all his worldly possessions and become a monk. “You did?”

“I’m a long way from an expert, but in my amateur and totally biased opinion, this painting is amazing. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Okay.”

Dark eyes narrow. “You aren’t convinced.”

“It’s not a bad painting, I’m not saying that. It’s just not *the* painting. The one I need to show considering I’m only doing this exhibit because of the one I painted on the gym wall.”

“Is there a photograph we could enlarge?”

I make a face. “No, that’s not the right way. I just need to show them…”

“Spontaneity?”

“Rage.”

That slow smile again, the one I still remember clearly in my mind all these years later. It’s even more poignant now, knowing that he cares about me enough to take those classes. To visit me on my exhibit when he must have a million things more important to do. “Then let’s show them rage. Should we slash everyone’s tires while they’re looking at the exhibit?”

“I like your dedication, but parking in New York City is a logistical nightmare already without adding in guerilla artistry to the mix.”

“Fair,” he says. “So what do you have in mind?”

“I want to paint something new for them. Something… real.”

“Like while they watch? Performance art?”

The idea dawns on me with a lurch and roll, the way the yacht moved beneath me. And then I’m falling with nothing to catch me. Only someone’s here to follow me down. “What if we went to the studio right now?”

He looks exactly the right amount of scandalized. And being the pragmatist, he glances at his watch. “It’s midnight. How long do we have before they open?”

“Long enough.”

For a moment he studies me, and I think he's wondering whether he's going to go along with this crazy plan. Wondering more than me, anyway. If there's one thing this man understands, it's raw determination. He'll be in it with me.

A brief nod. "Breaking and entering it is."

That's how we end up spending all night in a fancy SoHo art studio, its walls bare and white and waiting for the paintings that are stacked in my penthouse suite. That's how I end up painting a Medusa in swirls of purple and teal and pink using a wooden folding chair as my step stool.

I don't know where they planned to put the centerpiece of the show. Probably somewhere front and center, where everyone would see it first. This one's in the back of the studio. You have to look at every other painting first and turn the corner. And then she blazes at you in all her snake-fueled glory. She turns the viewer to stone, if Christopher's look of awe is any indication.

He turns to me, and I'm in awe of this, of him, of his bleary eyes and the smudges of paint from helping me. Of the expression of pride on his handsome face. How did we get here?

"I don't want to go," I tell him.

"We'll be back in a few hours. But I'm pretty sure I should shower before then." He touches his thumb to my cheek, and it comes away teal. "Probably you too."

"Should we leave them a note or something?"

He hands me one of the paintbrushes, this one tinged with dark purple at the tip. "Sign it. That's enough of a note."

I didn't sign the one I painted in the gym, but I take the paintbrush and swirl my name into the bottom right of the painting, where one of the fierce snakes writhes. "How's that?"

"Perfect," he says, his gaze locked on mine.

My breath catches. "Thank you for helping me."

"No, thank you for letting me be part of this. I went to college with legends in the business world, and I've still never seen anything close to this."

"Careful, or I'll start to think you're complaining about capitalism."

He gives me the slow smile. "Never."

It’s devastating, that smile and that ambition. Devastating the way I can’t seem to look away from him, not even when he touches my cheek again. This time he isn’t wiping away paint. He cups my face and holds me still. His head lowers in slow degrees, giving me time to stop him.

My body is incapable of moving right now. Even my lungs are frozen, my throat locked tight. Only my heart beats hard enough to hear. It pulses in my lips, waiting, waiting for him.

I spent a good part of the past four hours painting lips that are the focal point of this piece—lips that are full of feminine beauty and eternal regret, of desire and revenge. I’ve worked through the meaning of every rise, every indent, translated the shadows, but now that I look at Christopher’s lips, with their masculine utility, I don’t know what any of it means. There’s a secret code written all over his skin, the message plain if only I could read it.

His mouth meets mine, and for a moment the warmth stuns me. I can only stand there under the gentle press of him, feeling the heat spread through my face and down my neck. Down my stomach and into my legs.

He touches his tongue against the seam of my lips—a question. And I open my mouth in answer, letting him sweep inside with sleep-drunk desire. We shouldn’t be doing this. There are so many reasons why this is wrong, but his hands on my waist feel impossibly right.

A sound comes from me, a moan that would embarrass me if I were thinking. I’m only feeling. Only falling and letting him catch me, as if we’re meant to do that forever.

His tongue slides against mine, and it’s so intimate I have to gasp. The rush of cool air in my mouth, when he had been so hot, wakes me from the strange slumber. I look into eyes dark and heavy-lidded and more shocked than my own.

He takes a step back, letting his hands fall away. “Shit,” he says softly.

I haven’t kissed very many boys in my life, not enough to hear all the things they might say after they do it, but this response seems particularly disheartening. As does the way he can’t seem to look me in the eyes. “Shit?”

His throat works. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Why not? That’s what I want to ask. Something to soothe this tangle of hurt and hunger inside me. Instead I say, “Is this because Medusa’s

watching? She's actually not as innocent as she looks."

He shakes his head. "Don't."

My laugh sounds a little maniacal. "It's kind of weird that she looks innocent at all, right? That's not what people usually say, like, 'oh, she has that girl-next-door look with the snake hair.' But there's definitely something innocent about her."

"Harper."

"She's not shocked because you kissed her."

"You," he says gently. "I kissed *you*."

"And then you said *shit*, which I feel like I should tell you, in case you didn't already know, is not the best thing for a girl's self-esteem, mythical creature or otherwise."

"I'm not sorry I kissed you."

"Then why did you stop?"

"Because you're high on adrenaline right now. And paint fumes."

"You're doing the whole white-knight thing again, aren't you? Only this time you're saving me from you. Boys who think they know better than me are very annoying."

"I don't think if I had kissed you when you opened the hotel room door, you would have been nearly as receptive. Tell me that isn't true, and I'll kiss you until we both run out of breath."

I consider lying, because I want to know what happens when we're both out of breath. But I'm a terrible liar, which is how I got caught for doing the painting in the gym even though I hadn't signed my name. Besides, he's right about one thing—I wouldn't have let him kiss me if I hadn't been delirious from lack of sleep. Does that make the kiss more real or less?

In the end he leaves me on the sidewalk in New York City, a heavy-lidded bellhop standing with the door open, steam rising from grates in the flush of an industrial dawn.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

INCOMPARABLE

THE STUDIO LOSES their minds, chastising me over e-mail and talking about procedures way more than any place with the words “creative genius” in their Facebook bio should. Thankfully I sleep through most of that, and by the time I wake up at three p.m., Professor Mills has smoothed things over.

I’m wearing a forest velvet Givenchy dress with a wrapped bodice. The head curator seems a little drunk by the time Mom and I show up. “I should have had more faith in you,” the curator tells me, eyes bright with excitement and secret champagne. “The phone has been off the hook. Everyone wants a ticket, but we’re sold out.”

I give her a hug mostly because it looks like she needs one. “Thank you so much for giving me the chance to be here. I’m sorry if I stressed you out, but I just wanted to do a good job.”

She bursts into tears and ends up crying into my velvet-clad shoulder about how shitty the New York art scene is and how this might actually save her. Mostly I get through that encounter by telling myself that it’s not really happening, that I fell asleep slumped against Medusa last night and now I’m still sleeping under Christopher’s watch.

Professional art movers have already brought over the other pieces, which are being carefully hung beneath heavy spotlights. Caterers are setting up a table of hors d’oeuvre with cheese and olives and sesame-seed-covered pita chips to dip into truffle hummus.

Daddy shows up a half hour before the doors will open and squeezes me tight. “I’m so proud of you, Harper. And so glad I got to see this.”

The words strike me as odd, and I squeeze him back. “I’m sorry you had to cancel Japan… but also not sorry. It’s no 4.0, but it’s all I’ve got.”

“I don’t care about your GPA.”

That makes me roll my eyes. “Sure you don’t.”

He cups my face in his hands. “I’m serious. The world is a crazy place, but you already know that. That’s why you painted that gymnasium in the first place. I just want you to be safe and secure, and if that means making grades and doing what society expects, that’s the only reason I’ve ever wanted that for you.”

My heart squeezes tight, because I know that’s true. Maybe he wanted to understand me better. Maybe I would have liked to understand him better, but I always knew he wanted what was best for me. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Now give me a tour of this show before the whole world wants a piece of you.”

So I show him around the paintings of Medusa’s life and death. Only when we get to the final piece do I find Mom standing there, staring at it as if transfixed.

“Hell,” Daddy breathes.

Mom turns back with a slight smile. Her dress is glimmering and couture, showing off a figure some twenty-year-olds would kill for. She’s always been a beautiful woman, but never a happy one. “Look at what our girl did.”

Daddy clears his throat. “She’s… incomparable.”

Only I don’t think he’s talking about me.

And for a moment, with both my parents in the same place, not fighting, not throwing anything, with Christopher in the same city and planning to come to my show, everything is perfect. After my childhood I should have known that perfection is only ever an illusion. A shine you put on things that are too broken to ever be fixed.

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CHAPTER NINE

CAUTIONARY TALE

THE ROOM IS packed by the time the curator drags me to the makeshift platform to give a little speech. I give a small wave to my professor, who looks so different in a black lace dress instead of the brown tweed suits she wears to class. Christopher leans against the back wall, looking impeccable in a suit but somehow distant from everyone.

Someone who should belong but doesn't.

I'm not twenty-one yet, but Mom gave me a glass of champagne. It left my throat dry and scratchy, or at least that's how it feels as I look out at mostly strangers. They've been exclaiming and complimenting my work since they showed up.

My central piece is still up for auction.

Those display walls are glorified plywood; they don't even reach the ceiling. The curator was more than willing to take a chunk out of the maze for the publicity. The audience seem to like the whole surprise element of the main portrait, because the auction has already risen to crazy proportions even without Daddy bidding. I'm not sure if it's really the painting they love or the story around it, but either way that's a lot of money for charity.

I grasp the microphone, pretending my hands aren't slick with sweat. Pretending my voice doesn't quaver. "The story goes that Athena cursed Medusa with hair made of snakes and a face so horrible it would turn men to stone. We are told that she did this as a just punishment, because she was so offended that Medusa was raped in her temple. Except how would that be just, to blame Medusa for something that she didn't want and didn't cause?"

The crowd looks back at me, a little aghast, a lot uncomfortable that I would talk about this while they're wearing diamonds that cost the same as a whole car.

“I don’t think Athena cursed her, not really. I think she gave Medusa what she wanted most—weapons to protect herself with. Power, when it had been taken from her.”

It strikes me then, how close Daddy and Mom are standing next to each other. As if they’re a couple, when they could barely stand to talk to each other to arrange visitation.

“Do you know,” I ask the crowd, “that there is no recorded instance of her turning a woman to stone? Only men.”

Christopher might be made from stone, that’s how still he is as he watches me with those mysterious black eyes. It’s like he’s holding his breath, and maybe he is. Waiting to see how the story ends, even if we think we already know.

“In the end, it wasn’t enough. Men found a way to use her, taking her power for themselves, using her head to defeat their enemies. Medusa is a cautionary tale. She always has been, but I don’t think she’s warning us away from rage.” The last words I say directly to Christopher. “She’s warning us to use it better. To use it *more*. That’s our power, in the end.”

The crowd claps for me while Daddy hoots and whistles, because he can’t help but show his support for me. It feels like absolute exhilaration, stepping down from the platform and accepting the handshakes and hugs from people around me.

Mom squeezes me in a delicate hug, and Daddy puts his arms around us both. How long has it been since they hugged me at the same time? I can’t find a memory to place this with; it’s in a box all its own. And then they let me go—too soon.

I find myself standing in front of Christopher, a lingering smile on my lips. Even my embarrassment over the rejection last night can’t touch me now. We may not kiss again, but this man is a friend. Maybe the best friend I ever had.

“You blew them away,” he says.

“You helped.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not taking any credit for lock picking.”

“It’s a very interesting skill. You’ll have to tell me where you picked it up.”

His mouth opens, but I don’t hear anything. There’s a rush in the crowd, a heavy jostle that leaves me unsteady on my green-velvet heels. For a

minute I think they must have released fresh trays of champagne from the kitchen. Maybe filled with bonus diamonds?

Until there's a scream from behind me. I whirl to see my mother kneeling on the ground beside Daddy, who has his hand clutched to his heart, his eyes staring up at nothing.

Something dark moves through me, a sense that I caused this somehow. With my paintings or my hopeless dreams. That this is my fault.

"No," I whisper, but I can tell from the sound of my mother's mournful wail, like the sound you hear far away in an untamed desert, haunting and stark, that he's gone.

"Fuck," Christopher says, the word harsh.

My head feels light, and I realize in a split second of surprise that I'm going to faint. That my body would rather shut down than face what's happening. I'm falling, again, and this time there are strong hands to catch me.

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CHAPTER TEN

EMPTY-HANDED

THE FUNERAL TAKES place four days later in a historic cathedral in Boston. It's a private affair, with only me and Mom and Christopher and a handful of very close business partners. One of them gives Mom a look of undisguised hunger and makes her promise to let him know if she needs anything. Another one of them gives the same look and extracts the same promise from me.

I walk through the whole thing in a daze. Vaguely I'm aware that I've taken a leave of absence from school, that I should be dealing with grief. And maybe I could, if I could bring myself to really believe that it happened. Mostly I keep waiting to wake up.

Keep waiting for a hand to reach into the water and pull me out.

Christopher doesn't approach me at the funeral.

He doesn't write any more letters.

It's like a second blow, his absence, a fatal one where my father's death has maimed me. I try not to think about it, the same way I try not to think about Daddy.

While the funeral was a quiet affair, I'm dreading the reading of the will, because it will be a circus. Every single one of his wives and most of his past stepchildren will be in attendance to see if anything was bequeathed to them.

"Please don't make me go."

The words come out as a hoarse murmur, because I've only said them for the millionth time. It's not like my inheritance is a raffle ticket that will be forfeited if I don't show up. The actual will reading is just a formality. An anachronism. A public stoning. Someone will tell me what Daddy gave me, whether it's two dollars or two billion. It doesn't matter whether I'm present at the will reading. And God, I don't want to be there.

Mom sits on the sofa beside me, her eyes rimmed red from crying. She's mourned the loss of him more in the past two weeks than she did in the decade they had been divorced. "You and I are the only ones who deserve to be there."

She thinks he's going to give her something, and it kills me. Could he have changed that much? God, the child support arguments were so bitter. So freaking specific. By the end he had seemed to soften toward her. At the art studio there had been a moment when he'd looked at her and I'd had the thought that every child of divorced parents has at least once, a desperate hope, a terrible dream that they might get back together.

I shake my head. "Neither of us should be there. It will be terrible."

"We hold our heads high. All of those money-hungry bastards can sit there and be embarrassed when it comes out that they aren't getting anything."

And what happens when it comes out that you aren't? "Mom, whatever happens… you know that whatever I have, it's yours. Right?"

"You think he's going to leave me out?"

I look away, at the nondescript painting on the nondescript hotel wall. We're living on borrowed money right now, paying for this hotel room on credit because surely Daddy will have left us money.

Except I'm not so sure.

He loved me; I know that. And he even loved my mom in his own way. But he was always tied up about money. I could see him leaving me nothing as some kind of character-building experiment. I would have to quit Smith College without any way to pay the tuition, but I'm not as worried about me.

I'm more worried about what would happen to my mother's fragile sense of self if she holds her head high against all those wives and then ends up humiliated. She hasn't even met most of them. I've met them, on my annual spring break visits.

There would be glee, to see the first and most coveted wife taken down.

"I just think it doesn't make sense to put ourselves through that. Everyone's going to see someone else get taken down."

"They're going because they think they were important to him."

I'm not sure Daddy was that black-and-white. He cared for his other wives; at least he didn't treat them with disdain. But they got their small

piece of their fortune with the ironclad prenup he made them sign. He won't give them more than that, but not for the reasons that Mom thinks.

The other children will be there, too. Not biological children. I'm the only one he had, but there are plenty of other stepchildren through the years.

Including Christopher. *Will he be there?*

It will kill me to see him salivating for Daddy's fortune. Except why wouldn't he? He's always wanted money, and Daddy's money is as good as any.

"Whatever happens, we'll be okay," I say, but I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince.

Mom gives a firm shake of her head. "He wouldn't leave us empty-handed."

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

LIQUID AND OTHERWISE

THE WILL READING takes place at my father's lawyer's office, which is on the thirty-eighth floor of a building that overlooks a park blooming with pink and white cherry blossoms. It's strange to see the world so full of life when we're wearing black and facing death.

Mr. Smith, that's the name of the lawyer. A plain name for a rather plain man. He looks like he would follow the letter of the law down any path it would take him. Quite the rule follower, and it makes sense that Daddy would have used him for this purpose. Lord knows there are a large group of people who would love to contest even the smallest loophole. It's standing room only, the wood door propped open to let wives seven and eight peek their heads in from the hallway.

It's actually as much of a circus as I feared, with my mother and me being granted the dubious honor of the two chairs in front of the desk. It also means everyone can watch us.

Christopher is here, standing in the corner, looking as if he'd like to be anywhere but here—which must be a lie, because he didn't have to come. Unless he wants the fortune.

Acid burns my throat. So, he's as money hungry as everyone in this room. I wish I didn't know that about him. It would have been better not to come, if only to avoid facing that fact.

That Christopher wants Daddy's fortune.

"Thank you for gathering today," Mr. Smith says in a voice dry as leaves in the fall. "While many wills are handled via mail, this is a rather unusual case. I have asked any interested parties to attend so that we may all have closure and put an end to the numerous inquiries to the firm."

In other words the phone must be ringing off the hook with people wanting some of Daddy's money. My stomach feels inside out. Did he

know what kind of mess he would leave behind? He must have thought about it when he wrote whatever's on that piece of paper the lawyer's holding. Did he think of how it would feel to be surrounded by so many ex-wives and stepsiblings, all of whom are essentially strangers?

Did he know that Mom would be holding her head high, certain he would stand by her in the end? I sure as hell hope so. We're about to find out in the most public way.

A violent, hacking clearing of the throat. And then Mr. Smith begins to read. "If you're reading this, that means I'm finally at peace. And though I'll miss a good many things on this earth, one of them won't be the exorbitant amount of money I've paid lawyers over the years."

There's a nervous laugh from the side that's abruptly silenced.

In the same monotone Mr. Smith continues, "To the son that I never had, Christopher Bardot, I bequeath *Liquid Asset* as well as a small trust with which to care for her. I wish we could have sailed together more than once."

I'm jolted out of my grief-stricken stupor at the sound of his name. A ripple of excitement runs through the room. Christopher isn't his biological child, which means there's hope for everyone else in this room.

"As for the rest of my assets, both liquid and otherwise," Mr. Smith reads, "I bequeath them in entirety to my daughter, Harper St. Claire."

There's a gasp in the room, and I'm painfully aware of the looks of pure venom being shot in my direction. All I can do is stare straight ahead, shocked at hearing my father's final words, even if spoken in a voice so unlike his own. It's strange that hollowness can feel so solid, a physical sensation that threatens to bend me at the waist. *Daddy, come back.*

Nothing is so cold and so calculating as money in a void where love and hope had been. I don't want his billions of dollars, or however much his fortune amounts to. I never did. If there's one upside in all of this, it's that Mom will finally be able to relax. A small comfort.

"I have a stipulation for Harper, who is still young and impressionable as I write this. The money will be placed into a trust, which will only transfer to her when she turns twenty-five."

A heavy hum of conversation pierces my haze. That's seven years away. Seven years before I can return to Smith College. Seven years before my mother can stop marrying whoever will have her.

“Of course I don’t want to cause undue burden to her, so she may access money as needed for her education and living situation. But only for her. No one else may use the money, including my ex-wife.”

“No,” I say, my voice rusty. “Stop.”

He can’t do this to her, not in front of all these people. How can he humiliate her this way? He must have known. God, he must have known.

Mr. Smith gives me a pitying look before reading on. “To that end I name Christopher Bardot as the executor of the trust. I know that he will make sure my wishes are honored and that my only daughter is well cared for in my absence.”

The paper has barely brushed the gleaming wooden surface of the desk when the room erupts into chaos. There are demands to confirm the validity of the will, insistence that they will contest it. When I bring myself to look sideways, I see my mother has turned to stone—she’s frozen in place, a look of polite acceptance on her face.

It’s too horrible.

I grab her hand and drag her from the room, pushing through people I don’t even recognize in my quest to reach the wide marble hallway. How are we even going to find a taxi in this mess? We’ll be flagged down, caught on camera. This is what rich people have bodyguards for, but we’re not rich regardless of what just happened in that lawyer’s office. We have nothing, maybe not even a way to pay the hotel bill. I spin in the hallway, useless. There’s nowhere to run.

Christopher appears out of nowhere. “Come on, there’s a car waiting.”

I’m too frantic to even ask a question, like where we’re going. He could say we’re driving into the depths of hell, and I’d probably still follow him, taking Mom by the hand, pulling us both into the cocoon of a darkened limo. The press see us as Christopher moves to step inside, running toward us with their microphones outstretched and video cameras hot on their heels as the door shuts. Then the limo eases forward, taking us far away.

“Thank you,” I say, feeling both numb and exhilarated.

Christopher glances out the back window, his expression grim. “Damn him,” he mutters. “He should have given you some warning at least.”

Damn him. I cling to those two words like they’re a life preserver. Like when Christopher helped me break into the artist studio. We’re together, aren’t we? “You won’t help him, will you?”

My mother runs a shaky hand through her hair. “I’m ruined. No one will have me after this. Half the town knows what happened by now. There’s probably a YouTube video.”

I hate that she’s right. Daddy did more than make sure she couldn’t get his money. In that one public moment he made sure she would never marry well again. Everyone will say there must be something wrong with her, for Daddy to omit her this way. She’ll be the laughingstock of high society. Those rich husbands of hers, they didn’t only marry her body. They married her position in society. Her connections. The way she could host a dinner party with senators and billionaires. It doesn’t matter if I become a world-renowned artist, my mother will never get another society invitation again.

The limo turns onto the highway and speeds up. I’m sitting next to my mother, and I reach across the supple leather to take her hand in mine. Across from us Christopher looks haggard. He stares out the tinted window where the city speeds by.

I squeeze my mother’s hand. “It will be okay.”

“How?” Her mouth forms the word, but no sound comes out.

“Christopher will help us,” I say, the words like a tether. The red and white life preserver for me to hold on to when it’s too hard to swim. He’s always been there when I need him. Why would this time be any different? “He’s the executor, so he’s the one who decides what counts as being for me or for you. He’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

God knows there’s enough money in that trust fund to take care of my mother twenty times over, in the most extravagant ways she can think up. I didn’t expect Daddy to leave me empty-handed, necessarily, but I also didn’t expect to get every terrible cent.

The entire St. Claire fortune, minus the yacht.

I look at Christopher, but he hasn’t moved. I might as well have turned him to granite, the same way I did to my father at the exhibit. I don’t feel like I’m cursed and full of rage. My dirty-blonde hair doesn’t slither and hiss, but the men around me are as cold and hard as stone.

“You’ll help us, won’t you? It’s too cruel, what Daddy did. It’s wrong. If the money is mine, I can spend it however I want. Why shouldn’t Mom get some of it?”

It won’t matter if none of the rich assholes who think they own the world will marry my mother, not if she’s already taken care of. It will hurt

her to be shunned by her so-called friends, but at least she'll be able to live comfortably.

The strong profile and ebony hair does not move a single centimeter even as the limo exits the freeway and turns toward our hotel. Through the windshield I can see a small crowd gathered at the front door. The press. Not the hard-hitting journalism that exposed the corruption at my old school after my Medusa painting. These are the tabloid freelancers and gossip bloggers. We aren't celebrities in the way that a musician or a model is, but everyone likes to see the rich brought low. They've come to gloat at my mother's pain.

"Christopher!"

He speaks in a low voice to the driver, who turns before we reach the crowd. There's already a uniformed cop waiting to direct us into the parking garage. An entrance for celebrities and politicians, I realize. Someone set this up ahead of time. A way into the building without having to run the gauntlet of paparazzi.

Someone who knew we would need this.

"You," I whisper, my chest crushed by a thousand-pound weight.

Christopher finally looks at me, and I can't contain my gasp as I see the resignation in his eyes. "It's his last request, Harper. The only thing he ever asked of me. How can I say no?"

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CHAPTER TWELVE

INHERITANCE

IT TAKES ME forty-five minutes and a Valium to get my mother to relax in her bedroom, her lashes still damp from tears of anxiety and grief. Light batters my eyes as I step out of her bedroom and close the door gently behind me.

"Have you always taken care of her like that?" Christopher asks from the large windows that frame the city, his hands behind his back, looking out.

How dare he judge? He doesn't know her, or he wouldn't even be considering doing what Daddy asked him to do. And he doesn't know me, if he thinks I would speak to him ever again. "I'm sorry that not everyone in the world can live up to your exacting standards. I suppose we should all be so heartless as to put money before family."

He glances back, his eyes flashing. "Is that what I'm doing?"

If I were smart, I'd heed the warning in his voice, but he's the one with the GPA and the plans to take over the world. I'm the troublemaker. "Aren't you?"

A hollow laugh. "Is that why you think I stopped kissing you that night at the studio? Because you're my stepsister? Because I think of you like family?"

The way he says *family* it might as well mean *nuclear waste.* "I mean, yeah. But now I think maybe it was something else."

Those black eyes that hold so many secrets, they look over my body from the top to the bottom with such slow, obvious hunger that it seems impossible I would not have seen it before. "You aren't my sister, Harper St. Claire. And I have never, not once, thought of you that way."

My skin lights up under his stark perusal. "Then how do you think of me?"

He stalks forward until my back hits the wall of the suite. “Like you’re the daughter of the only man who ever gave a damn about me.” His mouth is only two inches away from mine…an inch…and then I can feel the gentle caress of his breath against my lips. “You were completely off-limits, when he was alive—” A rough sound. “And even more so now that he’s gone and asked me to do this thing that will make you hate me.”

“Then don’t do it,” I beg softly, and it’s almost a kiss, my lips moving near his.

“You have no idea, Harper. No idea what you’re asking me.”

“He was wrong to make that rule!”

“Maybe so, but I don’t know what the hell happened between your mom and him. It’s not my place to judge whether he should have done it or not. It’s his money, and this is how he wants it spent.”

“It’s *my* money,” I say, my voice made imperious with impotent rage.

He huffs his amusement. “Spoken like a true St. Claire.”

“Christopher, I don’t know if you think we’re only in this for billions of dollars. I don’t care about that. We have nothing. *She has nothing.* All she needs is enough to live off of. You can have the rest.”

He steps back as if I slapped him. “You think I want your inheritance?”

Something wavers inside me. Did I go too far? Christopher is going to let my mother starve because he wants to honor a request that should never have been made. That’s wrong. Not me standing up for her. “Everyone else in that room wanted it. And you were there.”

It’s like watching ice form over a lake in a matter of seconds. The water had seemed deep and unnerving, but now he’s simply impenetrable. “The only reason I went to that damn reading is because the lawyer called me this morning and said I should come. And something in his voice told me it was going to be bad, so I had the car waiting for us and the hotel on standby.”

My throat feels scratchy, like I’m near tears. “I didn’t thank you for that.”

“I don’t want your thanks. I don’t want that fucking yacht, either. And I sure as hell don’t want a single cent from your inheritance.”

“We’ve been living in a motel.” The words burst out of me, ugly and hushed so my mother doesn’t wake up. “Every day Mom takes one of her jewelry pieces to the pawn shop, where they give her a few cents for every

dollar that it's really worth. That's how we pay the bill so we have a place to sleep that night."

My words crack the ice around him, at least enough so that I see the old Christopher looking back at me, the one who would have dived into the ocean to save me. "Hell."

"Daddy paid for my tuition and my private dorm room directly, but that's it. If I had asked for anything more, he would have had his investigators look into us again."

He shakes his head. "I don't understand."

The words spill from me, more careless with our secrets than I've ever been. No, not careless. Trusting him to do what's right. "When I was nine, Mom was between husbands. We had this shitty apartment on the outskirts of LA and ate ramen noodles every night. It sucked, but I didn't really care. But I cared when Mom said we couldn't afford to get more paint, so I called Daddy." Tears sting my eyes, and it's such a twisted feeling to mourn him right now, to love him and hate him at the same time. "He came down on us like freaking Zeus from Mount Olympus. He took me to New York City until she had enough money to come get me, and that was only when she had found this asshole director who wanted her as his side piece. She did that for *me*, so that I could come back."

Christopher stares at me as if testing the words, weighing them the way he must weigh every sentence spoken in his crazy-smart Emerson business classes, the way he must gauge everything around him with that stone-cold confidence. And he must see in me the desperate truth, because he stalks back to the window and curses under his breath.

He's not even facing me, but I'm utterly and completely exposed. I could strip naked in this suite and still not be as naked as I feel right now. This is something I don't talk about with anyone, least of all with a man who's saved me twice. It's something of a pattern already, and that should be enough for me to make it stop. I can't depend on anyone, even him.

But I can't let my mother go back to arguing with the landlord for a few extra days. Not when I'm living like a princess at Smith College in the dorm Daddy paid extra to get. I can't let her whore herself to some asshole with money when I'm the heiress to a freaking fortune.

If I've convinced Christopher, the shame I'm feeling would have been worth it.

Please let it be enough.

He faces me, and he's so fully Christopher, so much the person standing beside me with his forearms on the railing that I breathe a sigh of relief. This man, I know him. He's the one I can count on to catch me when I'm falling.

"Harper," he says. My throat squeezes. He sounds like he's facing a firing squad. "Maybe it's wrong to use this against you, but you told me about that husband, the one who owned the job website. The one who climbed into your bed. And that makes me think your dad was right."

"No," I whisper, because this isn't going to end the way I hoped.

"He knew, okay? Your father knew that I'm a man of my word. He knew how much that meant to me… and why it means so much to me."

"Why?" I whisper, even though I know he isn't going to tell me. This is a man who hoards secrets the way a dragon keeps gold and jewels in his lair.

I would rather have no money than have a trust fund I can't use to support my mother… which Daddy probably knew, too. It was a final *fuck you* to the woman he could never get over. I accepted that weakness from Daddy a long time ago, but having him use Christopher to do it makes my stomach turn over.

I would be pissed, my friend had said once. *Like he's trying to control you with money, even though he has so much.* And for the first time I do feel pissed.

"He appointed me as the executor, and not the hundred other men he knows could have done it. Because he knew I would have to do it, if he asked me. And that I would never take a single cent out of the damn trust fund for myself or anyone else."

"Isn't there something more important than keeping your word? Isn't there doing what's right?"

A dark laugh. "Not to me."

"Don't do this."

He's made of stone again, any semblance of vulnerability turned hard. "It's already done, Harper. It was done before today. Before the art studio. It was done when your father sat down and wrote the will, knowing exactly what would happen."

“You’re giving him all the power.” All the power to ruin whatever was between us. That kiss standing beneath Medusa’s wrathful gaze. Maybe we had been doomed from the beginning.

“It’s not his choice anymore, Harper. Not even yours. It’s mine. And I’m going to do this for you, because he asked me to, and because it’s the only way I can protect you, even from yourself. You’ll give away every cent if you think it will help someone.”

“Protect me? This isn’t the Massachusetts Bay! I’m not sitting on the damn rail.”

“You told me to leave you alone then, too. And I’ll never regret staying on deck so that I could dive in after you. I’ll do it again if I have to.”

What would it take for this man to see me as a woman? As someone that can make her own decisions instead of as a maiden who needs saving. But I don’t think it’s even about me or what I need. He already told me, didn’t he? It’s his choice, and he would rather be a white knight whether it helps me or not.

“Christopher,” I say, my voice low and desperate. “That kiss.”

His black eyes sharpen. “What about it?”

“It means something to me.” Even if I have to slash my skin to pieces. That’s how much Christopher is worth to me. It’s more than a girlish crush, the way I feel about him. The feelings that are wavering like a drop of water on a petal, about to slide away.

“I told you it was a mistake.”

I swallow hard. “I think you’re lying. I think it meant something to you, too.”

His eyes are more opaque than ever, obsidian and shining. He twists his mouth into a look that’s worse than dislike—into pity. “You’re young, but I didn’t think you were stupid. A kiss doesn’t mean anything.”

My father’s death should have been enough to break me, but somehow I was whole. Until now, when I’m in a million pieces at Christopher Bardot’s feet. “No.”

“I felt bad for you, to be honest. That’s why I wrote you back.”

“You’re lying,” I say, hating the tears in my eyes.

“You weren’t a sister to me.” His words are cold, his eyes unfeeling. There’s no doubt he means those words. “You meant nothing to me. Just a poor little rich girl, all along.”

Betrayal knots itself in my stomach, so tight and so deep I'm not sure I'll ever be free of it. "Then why don't you walk away, if I mean so little? Let me manage the trust fund, and you never have to talk to me again."

"Obligation. This is something I have to do out of respect for your father."

Not out of respect for me. Never that.

Both men and money have a way of disappearing when you need them most. It's something I learned early, but clearly I needed to learn it again. Neither my stepbrother nor the inheritance were anything I could count on.

Neither of them were anything I could trust.

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SURVIVAL OF THE RICHEST

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CHAPTER ONE

BUSINESS PARTNER

THE PAPER IN my hand has been crushed in my fist and smoothed out with shaking hands so many times the ink has almost faded. Almost, but I have the words memorized anyway.

"Where is he?" I ask the pretty receptionist without introducing myself. It must be obvious who I am, unless Christopher Bardot likes to torment women all over the country. He might have given her a heads-up; Like, "by the way, I have a stepsister who hates my guts." Maybe they laugh about it before she gives him a blow job from beneath his desk.

That seems like exactly the kind of thing he would do.

"He's in a meeting," she says, clearly planning to block me. But her eyes give her away, her gaze darting to the frosted-glass doors to her right.

"Don't bother buzzing me in," I tell her, already heading in that direction.

When I push open the door, I'm confronted by a large conference room with dark wood paneling and leather chairs. There's only one man inside.

And it's not him.

Where Christopher's hair is dark, this man's is a deep gold, as if it's been turned that way from hours spent in the sun. Instead of eyes black like obsidian, this man has blue eyes that look as bright as the sky on a hot summer day.

In so many ways they're opposite, but there's something about him that's similar. The strength inherent in their bodies. The hunger for more than what he has. I recognize an ambitious man the way a gazelle lifts her head and senses a tiger nearby.

This man takes his time examining my body. I shiver a little in the cool office air, goose bumps on my skin. It's only the air-conditioning that makes

my nipples turn hard beneath the cotton T-shirt, at least I think so, but it's embarrassing either way.

"May I help you?" he says, and in those four words I hear a deep Southern drawl. While his eyes express acute interest, his tone is considerably more reserved.

"I'm looking for Christopher Bardot." My voice comes out strong, which is impressive when you consider the carnal appetite in this man's eyes would make a siren blush. If I weren't riding high on righteous anger I'd probably stammer and stumble like every other female of the species must do when faced with a man as clearly alpha as this one. Some evolutionary instinct grabs hold of my ovaries and says, *this man will hunt and protect and fuck.*

"He's not in the office at the moment, but if you want to sit down a spell, you can tell me what he's done to piss you off. Maybe there's something I can do to help."

"Do you have a piñata shaped like him and a bat? That would help."

He stares at me for a moment, and I think he's about to throw me out on the street. That would probably be the right thing to do considering he doesn't know who I am. Instead he throws his head back and laughs. "I like your spirit, even if I can't condone your methods. My business partner has many annoying qualities, but even so, I would like him intact."

"Your business partner?"

"Sutton Mayfair," he says, standing as he introduces himself with old-world manners. There are stacks of papers surrounding him on the glossy conference table. Clearly I've interrupted him at work, but he doesn't look impatient in the least. There's something deceptively casual about him in his slightly rumpled suit and blond hair an inch too long. The kind of deception that would make his enemies underestimate him.

"So you must know where I can find him."

"You can leave a message at the front desk."

"And lose the element of surprise? I'd rather not."

A small smile. "I know where he'll be tonight. There's some party happening, and we're supposed to go. I wasn't looking forward to wearing a penguin suit for the rich and powerful in Tanglewood, but the evening will be a whole lot more interesting if you're there."

My eyes narrow in suspicion. "Why would you help me?"

“Perhaps I want to see you in an evening dress.”

I’ve been asked out a hundred times before, but never with the blunt self-assurance that this man conveys. It’s a strange combination of courtesy and outright lust. “Are you taking advantage of the situation, Sutton?”

His blue eyes dance with humor. “I’m an opportunist, and I think you might be one too.”

“Fine, I’ll take it.”

“I’d much rather pick you up. Maybe have dinner first.”

Have a date with Christopher’s business partner? He would probably have a heart attack at the idea that anyone would treat me as a woman instead of a child. “A gentleman would add my name to the guest list.”

“Did I give you the impression that I was a gentleman? My apologies.”

“Now I can see why Christopher went into business with you.”

He places a hand on his heart, and even a few yards away I can see the roughened skin of him, the calluses and the faint white scars. Those are the hands of a working man, for all that he wears a suit and works in a high-rise now. “Ruthless,” he says.

“If that means I have my own invitation to the party.” There’s something alluring about Sutton Mayfair. If I met him in New York City, if he asked me out in a bar, I would say yes. But I can’t trust him knowing he’s tied to Christopher Bardot. Not even for one night.

Really, there’s no end to the things Christopher will ruin for me.

“On one condition,” he says. “Show me what you’re holding.”

The paper. I’m wearing my power boots and a T-shirt that says, *Feminist AF*. Of course he would have noticed my one weakness. It’s the reason I’m here in this office. Here in Tanglewood. The reason I need an invitation to the party tonight.

Swallowing down my shame, I toss the crumpled ball onto the cherrywood. He picks it up and smooths it out, his large fingers unerringly gentle with the worried bill.

“Looks like someone didn’t pay this,” he says, one square-tipped finger running down the credit card statement. I have a prickling sensation that tells me he would be able to recite its entire contents despite his good-old-boy demeanor.

“And that someone will have to answer to me. Tonight.”

He folds the paper carefully in half, and then half again. When he hands it back, it's almost completely flat. "Do you need money?"

"I have money." Not the ability to spend it—one of life's ironies.

He takes a step toward me, and suddenly I'm taking a step back. How did this man go from accommodating to dangerous in one second flat? "Christopher mentioned you."

My mouth feels dry. I tell myself I don't care about what Christopher says, that I don't care what this man thinks of me. "Did he?"

"He made you sound about this high. A child."

There's acid in my throat. "Of course."

"Now that I see you, I think he was holding out on me." Those blue eyes look at more than just my body; they look inside me, finding the sensitive places—pressing on them, only a little. Enough to make me gasp when his gaze catches mine.

"I'm not a child," I say, which only serves to make me sound like a child.

"No," he says, his lips forming the word, almost soundless. "Do you think Christopher is really confused about that? Do you think he sees that mouth and doesn't imagine all the things he could do to it? Do you think he doesn't think about you when he comes?"

My cheeks warm. "How dare you."

He gives me a smile that can only be described as indecent. "Maybe he is that blind."

I follow his stark blue gaze down to my chest, where my nipples have become hard at the *E* and the *A*. Even while my mind denies what this man is saying to me, my body already agrees. Christopher has always treated me like a child, but this man… he knows I'm a woman.

"There can't be anything between us. I hate your business partner."

"You think that's a requirement for being my lover? Come to the gala tonight. Make him suffer all you want, as long as you don't go home with him at the end of the night."

Surprise steals my breath, along with an unnerving rush of arousal. It's pure heat between my legs, the opposite of the ice-cold Christopher leaves me with. Who knew I would find the caveman thing so hot? I blame evolution, an ages-old certainty that this man could protect me from saber-tooth tigers. "You have no right to say that."

He gives me a half smile that doesn’t quite dispute my words. *Not yet,* it seems to say instead. A caveman he might be, but he also has a sense of determined patience. Too bad I’ve had my share of men with ambition. Whether they’re brooding and reserved like Christopher or confident and possessive like this one, they have no place in my world.

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CHAPTER TWO

OLD-MONEY GIRLS

“I’VE HEARD THE strangest rumor,” says the familiar voice over the phone, “that my best friend is in the city. I said there’s no way because she didn’t tell me she was visiting.”

I stare up at the crystal and gold chandelier that hangs above me, set in a thick crown molding. I’m staying at L’Etoile, a boutique hotel in downtown. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but it’s complicated.”

“So it’s about your stepbrother.”

“You didn’t tell me he moved to Tanglewood.”

She’s quiet a moment, and I know the accusation came out in my voice too strong. “I wasn’t sure he’d stick around, but Harper… he’s going to be in your life. There’s no escaping that, at least until you turn twenty-five.”

“And not a second too soon.” I’ve mostly managed to avoid the trust fund altogether, besides the payments to Smith College, which were sent automatically.

It’s obscene the amount of money sitting in a bank account under my name. It’s only gotten bigger under Christopher’s careful stewardship, his investments making me one of the richest women in the country. The man knows how to turn money into more money, that’s for sure. The Midas touch. I could buy a castle on every continent if I wanted one, but I can’t even write a check to charity.

The biggest upside to graduating this past spring was never having to touch the trust fund again. Until the credit card bill was an exception to the rule. A time when I had actually needed the trust fund and the ridiculous amount of money inside it.

Naturally, that means I couldn’t have it.

“I’m at the Emerald,” she says, referring to the gorgeous old hotel that Gabriel Miller bought her near Smith College while she goes to grad

school. “But you can still stay at our place. I can call the security firm to let you in.”

“Nah, I like L’Etoile. The way they’ve bastardized everything beautiful appeals to me.”

She laughs softly and then sobers. “How’s your mom?”

“In remission,” I say, my throat tight.

“If you need help…” The offer hangs in the air, sharp enough to leave scratch marks on my skin. “You were there for me when my father was sick. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that.”

“And you didn’t take a cent from me.”

“Harper.”

“We’re managing,” I tell her softly, which is mostly true. My paintings are just shocking enough to sell for large sums of money through my Etsy shop, usually sold a few minutes after I post them on my Instagram account. That money has supported me and my mother, but the medical bills are a little too intense for even a bloodthirsty Calypso.

“Have you talked to Christopher?”

“Tonight. I have an invitation to the Tanglewood Historical Society’s Annual Gala.”

She groans. “You’re going to run the gauntlet?”

“It was the only way I could find him. He wasn’t at his office.” I hesitate, a little uncertain whether I want to ask the next question. There’s something intimate about my encounter there, more intimate than it should seem for talking to a stranger with the conference room door open. “Have you met Sutton Mayfair?”

“No, but I’ve heard about him. He’s new on the scene, so naturally all the old-money girls are obsessed with him.” Her voice turns speculative. “Apparently he’s very sexy.”

“If you like that Southern-boy charm.” Which apparently I do? I haven’t had much exposure to that in LA or New York City, but turns out it’s seductive in a visceral way. It was easy to friendzone the artists at Smith College. Easy to roll my eyes at the ambitious business students, enough like Christopher Bardot to make me hate them on sight.

Harder to ignore the masculine confidence inherent in Sutton Mayfair.

“It’s more than an act. He grew up on a ranch, so you know…” Her voice sounds like pure wickedness as the words trail off.

“So he likes mucking stalls?”

“He’s probably good with rope, I was going to say.”

That makes me laugh when I didn’t think it was possible, not in my current mood. This is why Avery is my best friend. She can make me laugh even when I’m walking the figurative plank over a circle of rabid sharks. “I’m absolutely one hundred percent positive I won’t be finding out whether he’s good with rope.”

“Never say never.”

I remember the heat in his blue-sky eyes and shiver with remembered response. “I’m going to the gala to see Christopher. I doubt I’ll even talk to Sutton there, especially if he has the old-money girls flipping their hair to get him into bed.”

“Okay,” she says cheerfully, clearly not believing a word.

“And even if I did talk to him, I have no interest in going to bed with some overmuscled Neanderthal who looks amazing in a suit. I like my men more… enlightened.”

“Mhmm. I’m going to have someone send over this dress I ordered online but haven’t worn yet. It’s red and shimmery and it will look incredible on you.”

“I don’t need a dress,” I say, even though absolutely nothing in my canvas carry-on is suitable for a gala. There are sundresses and skinny jeans and paint-splattered pj’s.

“Text me when you get home, or I’ll worry about you.”

“You’re just hoping I give you dirty details, but there won’t be anything dirty. There’s only going to be me telling Christopher he’s an arrogant jerk face, and him bending to my will.”

She laughs. “Okay, but text me anyway.”

The dress arrives an hour later, even more gorgeous than she made it sound. There’s a red silk bodice that makes my modest breasts look impressive in the ornate gold-plated wall mirror. And a black wrap skirt that floats around me like liquid when I walk, revealing an impressive amount of leg. It’s a dress that a modern-day goddess would wear, along with the black and red Louboutins included in the box. In short I’m dressed to kill.

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CHAPTER THREE

TEARDOWN AND REBUILD

THE GALA TAKES place in the Tanglewood Country Club, a place that charges enough money to its members that the carpet shouldn't look quite as shabby as it does. It's a place with more clout than taste, which probably says more about the historical society than they think.

I can hear the gentle hum of voices and clink of glasses from down the hallway. The suited security guard makes me wait while he searches a printed guest list, which I'm not on. Do they really have a problem with party crashers hungry for dry quiche and dry conversation? Maybe it's been too long since we moved in wealthy circles, because my hands start to sweat. I don't belong here, at least not in spirit, and even this random stranger knows it.

Only when he uses his phone to check his e-mail does he find my late addition.

Holding my head high, I stride through the room. Avery grew up in Tanglewood, so I'm guessing she knows most of the people in this room. I know basically no one, and I don't see Christopher anywhere.

There are admiring looks because of the amazing dress.

Curious looks, because of my anonymity.

A familiar drawl slows my step. "Not sure it's better falling down," Sutton says, his back turned to me, speaking to an older woman who clearly does not appreciate his words.

"The Tanglewood Library has an important history, and it's the job of the society to preserve that. We aren't going to give it to just anyone who moves in with money."

"It hasn't been given away, Mrs. Rosemont. I bought it."

Her face flushes red, and I realize I've stumbled into the scene that every single person will be talking about in Tanglewood tomorrow

morning. Unless I somehow stop it.

“Do you think money counts for everything, young man? You’ll find that money can’t buy you everything. It can’t buy you a construction permit if we tell city hall not to give you one.”

“He bought it because he values the foundation,” I say, tucking my hand through Sutton’s arm as if I belong there. He stiffens only slightly but doesn’t give me away. “Maintaining the historical integrity is an important part of the Mayfair-Bardot corporate philosophy. They plan to work closely with the society to ensure they do it justice.”

Her eyes narrow. “Then why haven’t they contacted us before now?”

I shake my head, commiserating with her at the cluelessness of men. “They’ve been overly focused on things like paperwork and permits. That’s why they’re here tonight, though. To meet you and ask for your help in doing this the right way.”

“I see.” She looks pissed, but at least she stops threatening him. “The gala is hardly the place to discuss details.”

Sutton clears his throat. “We would be happy to host you at our offices at your earliest convenience. We wouldn’t dream of moving forward without the society’s input.”

“You need more than our input,” the woman says sharply. “You need our approval or you’ll never get the construction permits you need from the mayor’s office.”

I manage to keep a straight face, even though it’s painfully clear that Sutton and Christopher had planned to move forward without the society’s input. It may not have even occurred to them that the society might object—or that they could put in place roadblocks with building permits. I may not know the specifics of Tanglewood, but I know high society. Even if the society itself doesn’t have any power, the husbands of its members certainly do.

Sutton manages to use that Southern charm to win Mrs. Rosemont over, so that she’s blushing and trying not to smile by the time she’s called away by another woman.

“You saved me,” he murmurs the second we’re alone.

The words startle me, because I’m so used to being the one who needs saving. The one who gets saved again and again, even when I don’t want

that. It's an illicit delight, being the one who does the saving. No wonder Christopher likes it so much. "You would have figured it out."

"I'm a lot better with a construction crew than I am with women."

Considering the looks he's getting from around the room, he's underestimating himself. Even so I have to admit he wasn't doing so well when I found him. "Were you really planning on restoring a historical site without consulting anyone?"

"It was less of a restoration, more of a teardown and rebuild."

I groan. "City hall is going to block you so fast."

"We own the deed," he drawls.

"And they own the city. You can fight them, but that's a last resort. Especially for people who are new to the city like you. It's going to take a while before you have friends."

He looks at me, mystified. "You made friends with that woman."

"That's because I'm interested in people more than money. You should try it sometime."

A rough laugh, the kind I can imagine beneath a vivid sunset in the country. "It's always the people who come from money who think it doesn't matter."

"It's always the ambitious ones that crush everyone in their way."

He pulls me close, and only then do I realize I'm still holding his arm. That we're locked together in the middle of the ballroom. Everyone is looking at us and pretending not to see. They'll be talking about the mystery woman tomorrow. "Then I had better keep you nearby, so you can protect everyone."

My throat tightens. The idea that I can protect anyone… even metaphorically, it's completely absurd. I'm the helpless one, aren't I? At least that's how Christopher Bardot sees me.

A shiver runs through me. I turn to find him behind me, as if conjured from my thoughts. I yank my hand away from Sutton, which only makes me look guilty. I wasn't doing anything wrong. I'm allowed to be here, but Christopher always makes me feel like a troublesome child.

"There you are," I say lamely.

His eyes are narrowed on me. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. You must have known I would come."

"A phone call would have worked."

“Not when it’s my mother’s health we’re talking about.”

“We should discuss this in private.” He turns to Sutton, and his eyes somehow grow even colder. “How did she even know I would be here?”

Sutton gives a small smile, completely undisturbed by his business partner’s fury. “You didn’t tell me she was skilled in diplomacy. She already smoothed things over with the historical society.”

“For now,” I say.

He studies me, as if looking at me through fresh eyes. Almost. The speculation is gone in a second, leaving only the cold remoteness I know so well. “Follow me,” he says, turning and leaving me to trail behind him.

Sutton holds out his arm, and I realize he’s going to come with us.

Or at least he’s offering to escort me. Does he think I need backup? Looking at his face, I realize he doesn’t. It’s something far more base. Male possession, except he’s asking my permission.

One of these men sees me as competent. The other as a helpless girl. One sees me as powerful. The other as weak. I put my hand in Sutton’s arm and walk side by side out of the ballroom, confirming the suspicion of everyone at the gala. They’ll all be certain we’re together, and the crazy thing is, I’m not sure they’re wrong.

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CHAPTER FOUR

A TEA PARTY

WE FIND A private room with a handful of old chairs and a fireplace. How many corrupt deals were forged between these four walls? How much money changed hands?

Christopher stands in the corner by the window, his back turned toward us. What does he see? Is he like some conquering warrior, looking at what he plans to take?

In contrast Sutton takes a seat near the fire, one leg slung over the other. His pose is casual, but I'm not fooled. His blue eyes are watchful. He's a powerful adversary, but I'm not sure who he's opposing. Christopher? Or me? Maybe the both of us.

We might be enemies, all three of us.

"You stopped payment to the hospital," I say without preamble. He knows what he did. "I honestly thought you couldn't sink any lower, but you proved me wrong."

"It's not that simple," Christopher says, his expression grave.

"In case you're wondering, I would have asked for Daddy's help with this if he were alive. And you know what? He would have said yes, so don't pretend this is the high road."

"The instructions didn't leave any ambiguity."

"And you're such a rule follower, are you? You didn't even contact the Tanglewood Historical Society when tearing down a historical property."

"I follow the rules when I agree with them."

My mouth drops open. "You don't agree with helping my mom beat cancer?"

"Hell," he bites out. "That money wasn't going toward medicine. You were buying a butterfly garden for the hospital. And what was that going to

get her? A California king-sized hospital bed? A marble bathroom? A doctor to wait on her hand and foot like a goddamned pool boy?"

"I hate you." Not the most logical and persuasive argument, but there's something about Christopher that always cuts through my defenses. He turns me into the wild child that he thinks I am, no matter that years have passed since that night on the yacht.

He runs a hand over his face. "I'm not a monster. I cut off the hospital from taking any more *installments* from you, but I made sure there was a card on file for her medical expenses."

"Your personal credit card."

"Does it matter?"

"I'm not letting you pay for her medicine. We don't need your charity. It's my responsibility, and it will be paid for with my money. As soon as you call the bank and tell them to lift the hold."

Christopher stares at me, and I feel my stomach drop. I know determination when I see it, and it's there in spades in his cold, black eyes. He's not going to budge, but neither am I. We're at an impasse, the same one we've been in since that night in New York City.

Sutton clears his throat. "It's quite a moral dilemma you've got yourself."

"She finds herself in those often," Christopher says.

"I was talking to you," Sutton says in that slow drawl that smooths his sharp words, a flowing stream over sharp rocks. "I knew you were mercenary, but this is cold even for you."

Christopher gives him a sardonic look. "Is there any reason you're here or do you just like seeing me at my worst?"

I'm mildly appeased to hear that I'm the reason for his worst days, but he looks remarkably composed if that's true. Remarkably put together in his tux and shiny shoes. He fits into this room better than Sutton does, better than I do, even if he doesn't respect the order of things.

"I have a solution to propose," Sutton says. "Something that might appease everyone in the room. We need someone to smooth things over with the historical society. Neither you nor I have the time or the ability to make nice with them."

Christopher barks a laugh that makes me flinch. "You're not suggesting Harper."

“Why is that so hard to believe?” I ask, stung more than I should be. Nothing he says should matter to me. It’s a weakness that it does. “That someone thinks I’m good for something more than shopping or spa days?”

Christopher blinks, looking, for maybe the first time in his life, uncertain. “Is that how you think I see you? You’re a talented artist, Harper.”

“And I’m stuck begging for my mother’s life.”

“She’s in remission.”

“How would you know that?”

Sutton leans forward, drawing my attention away from the man I want to throttle. Unlike Christopher he doesn’t look unmoved by my mother’s situation. Instead there’s a notch of concern between his eyes. “So she is in remission?”

“For now.” There’s a sense of relief, however brief, that someone other than me worries about Mom. That particular load, I’ve carried since I was six years old.

“Good.” He relaxes again, as if he cares about what happens to her. And maybe he does. That’s a normal trait, concern for your fellow human beings. “We have a lot poured into this reconstruction. Everything we have, in fact.”

Christopher makes a quelling motion. “This doesn’t concern her.”

“We worked out a thousand different angles with economics and real estate and legal, but we didn’t consider this. Which is probably why our permits have been tied up in city hall for weeks now. We didn’t realize the power the historical society holds—”

“Unofficial power,” Christopher adds darkly.

Sutton nods. “You saw what we missed in less than a minute.”

“Have you really put everything you have into this?” I know that Christopher doesn’t have as much money as the trust fund. Really, who does? His was a white-collar background, for all that his mother married into my family for a few seasons. But I don’t know what he has, specifically. He’s always refused to take even a nominal salary for the work in managing my inheritance. Which is annoying, really. A nice salary and bonuses for the kind of growth the fund has had should be standard. Why hasn’t he let me pay him for it, if he has limited funds?

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Christopher says, which means *yes.*

“We have enough for construction,” Sutton says, “which isn’t pocket change. But walking away from the library isn’t really an option with what we’ve put into it. It’s our plan A, plan B, and plan C. There’s no alternative.”

“Why didn’t you put some of the trust fund into it? Like as an investment?”

His eyes flash. “That would be unethical.”

“Like letting a sick woman suffer because you’re a pompous asshole?” He could learn a thing or two about concern for your fellow human beings. He doesn’t care about my mother. And he definitely doesn’t care about me. *Unethical.* Ha!

“She’s not suffering. Her pain is manageable and her prognosis favorable.”

Surprise locks my muscles tight. There’s a healthy dose of suspicion along with it. “Favorable. That’s what her doctor told me last week. Now I want to know how the hell you know anything about her condition.”

“It’s part of my role as executor to make sure you’re safe.”

That makes me laugh. Safe, because he wants nothing more than to ride in on his damned white horse. He wants to spy on us and then call it protection. “If my mother isn’t allowed a single cent from the trust fund, then she’s not part of your stupid role. You don’t get to have it both ways.”

I turn my back on him to face Sutton, who I’m finding infinitely more reasonable to deal with. The fire burnishes his golden hair, making it seem as if he’s glowing. While Christopher is vibrating with tension and I’m flushed with frustration, he looks merely thoughtful. Those brilliant blue eyes sift through the things we’re saying… and the things we’re not saying.

“I hate to break it to you,” I tell him, “but I’m not exactly rooting for your success here. So I’m probably not the best person to help with your diplomacy problem.”

Sutton seems at ease in the tux and the Queen Anne chair and the stuffy old country club. It’s the kind of assurance that comes from being fully comfortable with who you are. He’s ambitious, but in a different way from Christopher, without the desperate, dangerous edge. His is a pure manifestation of hard work and hard play.

He’s probably good with rope. The words come back to me at this completely inappropriate moment, making my cheeks heat. I have no interest in being tied up, but there’s something about a man so intensely physical that draws me like a magnet.

Sutton leans forward and clasps his hands together, elbows on his knees. His eyes are sharp and as wide-open as a summer sky. “We put everything into this project because we can make even more back. This will change the city. You smooth this over for us, and we’ll buy a whole damn hospital wing.”

“How is that any different than Christopher giving his personal credit card?”

“Because this isn’t personal. It’s business.”

The room feels alive with sexual tension and dark undercurrents. This is intensely personal, but he’s also right in a way. It’s also business—and if I earn that money through my own work, then it’s fair game. As fair as any painting I’ve sold. “Seriously, though. You weren’t even going to call the historical society?”

“And do what?” Christopher asks. “Throw a tea party?”

“As you can see, we need your help,” Sutton says, his expression sardonic.

In that moment I know I’ll be spending some time in Tanglewood. Not only because it will help my mother. Despite what I said before, I do actually care about the company’s success. Christopher and I have too much history for me to be apathetic, no matter how much I want to be.

He could have learned every number in the textbooks at Emerson, but they didn’t prepare him to face off with the righteous Mrs. Rosemonts of the world.

And it turns out that Sutton is good with rope, at least in an abstract sense. With every word he pulls the knots a little tighter. He tugs me a little closer. I’m not sure how I let him ensnare me this way, but already it’s hard to see my way free.

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CHAPTER FIVE

BASICALLY POISON

"WHEN ARE YOU coming home?" Mom says after picking up the phone.

I cringe a little at the word *home*, but I'm careful not to let my feelings enter my voice. She has more things to worry about than whether her daughter, fresh out of college, wants to live in the spare bedroom. So much has changed in the four years since the will reading, but in other ways everything is the same. "It'll take longer than I thought."

She sighs. "Christopher isn't going to bend, baby."

"He might," I say, because there's no point in explaining the whole thing about the library. It will only stress her out. "Actually he's being more reasonable. I think if I stay a couple more weeks, we might have it worked out."

"I don't need the experimental treatment," she says for the millionth time. "I don't want that. I only agreed because you were so adamant. My herbalist has a whole plan laid out for me, to make sure I stay in remission."

"Mom, you know what the doctor said. A good diet can help you stay strong and healthy, but it's not going to keep the cancer from coming back."

"I'm convinced it was all that coffee I drank. I never realized how toxic that stuff is. You aren't still drinking lattes, are you? It's basically poison."

I don't bother arguing with her, because the poison that caused her cancer changes every week. It was whatever they put in the facials or the chlorine in the gym's pool. I think in a weird way it helps her feel in control of what's happening to her body, being able to place the blame on something specific.

"No lattes," I say, ignoring the empty coffee cups strewn around the hotel room.

"Good. I never want you to go through this."

Worry is a hand around my chest, because mostly Mom doesn't complain about how she's feeling. She tuts and fusses and worries but she never just yells, *this fucking hurts.* I wish she would actually; it seems like that would be cathartic. This is the way she tries to help me, but the doctor was very clear on her chances for staying in remission. Which are high.

"I actually need you to do me a favor," I tell her, feeling guilty that I need this from her. There's only so many times I can wear paint-splattered clothes to the office. "Can you throw some clothes in a box and overnight them to me? I didn't pack enough."

"Oh," she says, sounding relieved. She likes it when I need her. "I can do that. What do you need, more jeans? A few bras."

"Nicer things, if you can find them. Some evening clothes. And there's this black skirt somewhere in the back. No pressure, don't spend too much energy on it, okay?"

"Evening clothes," she says, proving her mind is just as sharp as ever even if her body has wasted away to half its size. She's always been fashionably slender, but now she's painfully skinny. "What are you doing with Christopher that you need evening clothes?"

"I'm visiting Bea tomorrow night," I say, glad to have some excuse. "You remember her? Beatrix Cartwright. The daughter of the famous concert pianist."

"Of course I remember her," Mom says. "I'll send you a few cute dresses to pick from. But Harper, remember to be careful."

"Beatrix doesn't bite."

"That's not what I mean. Men like Christopher, they can be charming when they want to be."

"Don't worry, Mom. He doesn't want to be."

Which is probably the only reason I'm safe. In a weird way I'm almost grateful he's such a pompous asshole. It would be so easy to fall for him again if he weren't.

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CHAPTER SIX

PENTHOUSE

BEATRIX CARTWRIGHT LIVES in the penthouse of L'Etoile. We met a long time ago at some party where my pink tulle itched me like crazy and the children mostly tried to stay out of sight so we didn't get roped into reciting our life goals. Then tragedy had fallen on her family, leaving her orphaned and absent from elite society.

I found her years later on the online artist scene, where I recognized her voice and her hands and her inimitable talent with the piano. Despite her large platform and success, she had managed to stay anonymous—something that made me green with envy. There were memes about my untouchable fortune that I ended up tagged on with unnerving regularity. The Internet has a long memory.

She's since gone public and found true love in the strangest place. I'm a fan of her boyfriend, Hugo Bellmont, even though he was a high-priced escort when they met. Or maybe because of that.

He's the one who meets me when I arrive, devastating in his handsomeness, his hair in perfect disarray. It feels perfectly natural that he should kiss me on both cheeks and take my wine offering with a groan that sounds sexual. "Chateau Leoville," he reads. "Nineteen eighty-nine. *Merci infiniment.* I love a great Bordeaux."

I breathe deep, taking in the scent of spices. "It smells delicious, and I haven't eaten all day. Don't tell me Bea has taken up cooking?"

"Sometimes she helps me with the vegetables, where her fingers are as efficient with a knife as they are with the piano keys, but today she has been shut into her music room."

"A difficult piece?"

"She plays it perfectly, again and again. It is the artist temperament," he says, teasing because he knows I paint. "Never satisfied."

I stick out my tongue, which only makes him laugh. “Let’s call the temperamental artist to the table, because I’m ready to eat.”

“Oh, but we’re waiting for one more guest.”

“Really,” I say, flopping onto the antique couch with its bits of fluff peeking out. The penthouse is a curious mix of the old world and the new, much like the couple who inhabits it. Though Bea makes limited appearances in Tanglewood since they got together, they’re both very private. I’m curious who else has made their way into the inner circle.

“It’s an old friend,” Hugo says as he stirs some kind of soup on the small freestanding stove. He sounds almost embarrassed, as if he should not have any friends. Or maybe not any old ones.

“From Morocco?” I ask, knowing he was born there.

“*Non*, he came to Tanglewood around the same time I did. We shared a one-bedroom apartment before either of us could afford anything more.”

I refrain from asking whether this man also worked as a professional escort, but only barely. Maybe he still does that job. I could be persuaded to hire a ridiculously handsome man with nimble hands and an expressive mouth. Knowing Christopher would see the charge is a bonus.

“You will be disappointed,” Hugo says, sounding rueful.

“Can you always read women’s minds?”

He dips a fresh spoon into the sauce and tastes it. “Ah, that’s perfect. Salt and pepper and enough heat that it feels warm going down. And in answer to your question, usually.”

“That must have come in handy.”

“It is…” He searches for a word, looking perplexed. “A curse.”

I have to laugh. “It’s a great loss to the female kind that you’re now monogamous.”

A small bell rings near the elevator, which I assume means someone is coming up. “Well, perhaps you will not be disappointed. Sometimes you remind me of my old friend. It is the way you both seem to be more alive than the average person, more… feeling.”

“That’s also a curse,” I say, a little wry.

The elevator door opens, and none other than Sutton Mayfair walks in. His shirtsleeves are rolled up, his slacks a little rumpled. He clearly has

spent a long day at work, maybe solved a great many problems related to economics and real estate and law. From my perch on the sofa I can watch him without him noticing me, not at first.

Hugo greets him with one of those manly back slaps and a French expletive. “A nineteen eighty-five Chablis? It’s truly indecent the volume of great wine we’ll enjoy tonight.”

Sutton takes a few steps into the penthouse and freezes. His expression is blank, which must be what surprise looks like on him. There’s no indication whether he’s happy to see me or whether he wishes he’d never come. No indication whether he likes this white gauzy evening gown, which was included with a few other dresses in the box that Avery sent.

She’s thorough, that girl.

I would have said I had no desire to see either Sutton or Christopher so soon after our country club confrontation, but I can’t deny the beat of pleasure in my veins. Colors seem more vibrant when Sutton’s in the room. The strains of piano through the door more bittersweet. This must be what Hugo meant, that he’s more alive than everyone else. More feeling.

“Harper,” he says, cautious the way he might be around an animal. Careful not to spook me. Do I seem so wild to him? There’s definitely something inside me that wants to be soothed by his large hands. It’s too dangerous, though. He’s too close to Christopher to be safe.

“You already know each other?” Hugo asks. “This is fortunate, then.”

“Fortunate,” I agree, though my voice is faint.

“She’s going to be working with us on the Tanglewood Library restoration.”

“I thought it was going to be more of a teardown and rebuild?”

“She’s changing that,” Sutton says, his voice warm with approval. And gratitude? Somehow I’ve gone from being the troublemaker to the guardian angel. “We’ll need the buy-in of the upper crust if we want to gentrify the west side.”

That snaps me out of my Southern-drawl-induced haze. “The west side? I haven’t spent a long time in Tanglewood, but isn’t that a really dangerous part of town?”

“You won’t be going there unescorted,” Sutton says.

Even though I have no desire to stroll through dark back alleys, I don’t want Sutton to worry about protecting me. It’s too close to what Christopher

has done. “I can take care of myself.”

Sutton advances toward me, making my stomach clench. He leans over me, resting one hand on the back of the sofa. He’s not touching me, not anywhere, but I can feel the heat of him. I can scent the male essence of him. It’s an intimate position, his body hovering over mine.

“Don’t mistake me for him,” Sutton says, his voice low.

“Then don’t act like him. No one has to save me.”

“Save you? No, sugar. I want to peel that sexy little dress away from your body and make love to you so hard and so long you’re going to beg. You can’t take anymore, that’s what you’ll say, and if I were a better man, one who wanted to protect you and keep you in a safe little box, I would stop. Except I won’t be done with you for a long time.”

A sound escapes me. It should be a protest, an outrage, but instead it’s a moan. God, he’s making me want this. “You’re making Hugo uncomfortable.”

Sutton gives a rough laugh. “He’s pretending he can’t see anything except his fancy French sauce, but if he thought you didn’t want me, he’d have already given me a black eye. And I’d have deserved it. Do you know why he hasn’t done that?”

Because he always knows what women want. It really is a curse.

I’m tired of having Sutton pursue, not because I don’t want this, but because I do. Why am I holding myself back from him on account of Christopher? It’s in this moment that I can admit that I still want him. Still love him. That’s the only reason I could be thinking about him when another man stands right in front of me. It hurts to admit that, even privately. My fortress of protection against men and their transience, torn down in an instant of self awareness.

The heart is fickle. It doesn’t listen to reason.

But I don’t have to obey my heart when I know it’s wrong. There’s no loyalty I owe Christopher Bardot, and none he would want from me anyway.

I grasp the red silk tie in my hand and pull. A grunt of surprise, and then he’s falling forward. His lips meet mine without any semblance of softness. We’re all determination in this moment, which is more potent than a thousand sweet caresses. More real than a hundred whispered promises.

He deepens the kiss with one arm beneath my head, his other hand against my cheek, angling my mouth to take him better. It’s consuming, this kiss… and public.

A polite cough sounds from a few yards away.

Distantly I realize the music has stopped. It’s almost painful to tear my gaze away from the burning blue eyes staring down at me, made hazy and harsh with desire.

Bea stands just outside her music room, looking scandalized. “We really need to have more dinner parties, Hugo.”

He crosses the room and greets her with a kiss. “Do you have a bit of the voyeur? They do make a beautiful couple.”

“We’re not a couple,” I say quickly, but the objection loses some of the steam considering Sutton is still half over me, my leg draped over his from where I had pulled him close. Roughly I push him away and sit up, shame making my cheeks warm. “I just work for him.”

“But of course,” Hugo says agreeably. “That’s how Bea and I met as well.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

GOODNIGHT KISS

WITH ANY OTHER couple I probably would have died of embarrassment, but Hugo and Bea have a way of putting me at ease. They share a few funny stories about their cooking mishaps. There are a stack of cookbooks from around the world on a tall shelf. Mostly Hugo is a brilliant cook, but when he encounters an ingredient that's hard to get, he improvises with mixed results.

"Did you cook for Sutton when you were roommates?" Bea asks.

"I made many packages of cheap noodles."

Sutton smiles, looking a little distracted. "They were all we could afford at the time, but Hugo used to talk about food. About caviar and foie gras and other shit I'd never even tried back then."

"And what do you think now?" I ask, twirling the wineglass. A few pours of that Bordeaux, and I'm feeling downright pleased with my short public performance.

Sutton's blue gaze meets mine. "I'm a simple man."

"You know," I say, drawing a little circle on the marble table, "I'm pretty sure that's not true."

Hugo laughs. "She has you figured out."

"Not all the way," I admit. I'm a little tipsy after helping finish two bottles of wine. Not drunk. Enough to lower my guard, that's all. "Enough to know that good-old-boy act hides a lot underneath. Tell me something about you that I don't already know. No, that's too easy. Tell us something that Hugo doesn't know about you."

Sutton looks away, a half smile on his face. Not quite refusing. "And what will I get in return?"

"You're always looking to make a deal."

“That much is true. So what are you going to give me, in exchange for this secret you want?”

“What do you want?” The question comes out more seductive than I meant it to, my voice low and thick with desire. He turns me into some other woman, one who doesn’t need to be rescued. One who rescues a man instead.

“A goodnight kiss,” he says in that way that sounds simple but isn’t.

“Only a kiss?”

He smiles. “Only that.”

“Then you have yourself a deal.”

“Aren’t you going to shake on it?” Bea asks, her cheeks pink even though she’s the only one of us who didn’t touch the Bordeaux, her green eyes bright with mischief. “If the deal’s going to be official, you should shake hands.”

Sutton appears solemn as he offers his hand over the table, on top of the empty platter of coq au vin and the brandy-sauce green beans. I grasp the warm strength of him, the rough calluses of him, and squeeze. He gives a gentle squeeze in return. Our bodies can speak a language more fluently than our mouths, communicating, negotiating.

“A good secret,” I warn him, “or the deal is off.”

He considers the final swallow of red wine in his glass, taking his time to come up with what he’s going to share. “There was a horse named Cinnamon,” he finally says.

“That’s your secret?” I mean, it’s an adorable secret. But it’s not enough. “I’m going to blow you a kiss. That’s all you’re getting for that secret.”

He holds up a finger, and I realize he’s tipsy too. “That’s not the end of it. Giving her a name was more wishful thinking. She was wild, that one. Unbreakable. My dad kept her because she was a beauty, hoping one day they’d tame her. But really it was shitty to keep her locked up when she wouldn’t let anyone near her. And then one day I went out to the stable, and she was gone. I checked everywhere—the whole stable and the pastures, but the latch had been moved from the outside, so she couldn’t have gotten out alone.”

This suddenly strikes me as a tragedy, and I realize I should have been more specific. A funny secret. The kind that will make us laugh. Instead

something terrible is going to happen.

“Finally found her down by the lake, where the kid who worked as a farmhand in the summer was trying to coax her to keep going. She wasn’t budging.”

“He was running away,” I whisper, recognizing the ache in my chest.

There had been an unfortunate number of times I contemplated that action, not because the streets of LA would have been hospitable but out of pure desperation. But I worried about who would take care of my mother if I left. She would have blamed herself.

Daddy would have blamed her, too.

“His home life was pretty shit. Everyone knew that. Daddy drank too much. Mom worked to pay rent and to stay out of the way. He showed up with bruises that people pretended not to see. But he rode Cinnamon when no one else could go near her. Rode her bareback without getting thrown off and breaking his neck. If the beast weren’t nervous about crossing the stream at the border of the land, if he hadn’t been worried she’d break her leg, he would have been halfway across the county with her.”

“What happened?” Bea asked, looking sick with worry.

Hugo touches her hand, a caress that speaks volumes. “Do not worry. Even Sutton is not so careless that he would tell a tragedy over dinner conversation.”

Then he gives Sutton a look that promises stark retribution if Sutton had really been so careless.

Sutton grins. “Where I’m from, we had more tragedy than comedy. But this story does have a happy ending. I brought the boy and the horse back home, and my dad moved him up from shoveling hay to working with the horses. He tamed Cinnamon before he grew up and left.”

There are tears in Bea’s eyes. “That’s the saddest thing I’ve ever heard.”

Hugo makes a clucking sound before pulling her into his arms, onto his lap, uncaring that he has an audience. I could paint them this way, the handsome charmer and the old-world beauty, both of them made hard by the world and soft again for each other.

And then something clicks. “Oh my God.”

“You see it?” Sutton asks, his voice low. “I thought it would just be me, pretending not to.”

“What are you talking about?” Hugo says, a notch between his brows. “Ma belle, are you ill?”

“No, but she does have a condition,” I say, trying to contain my excitement and failing. “Bea, why didn’t you tell me? I hate you! Okay, I’m over it. I love you again. This is so exciting!”

There are many expressions Hugo can wear comfortably—amusement and sarcasm and seduction. I’ve never seen this one. Astonishment. “What?”

Bea’s cheeks are more than pink now. They’re a deep peach, so dark they match her freckles. “I wasn’t sure how you’d react,” she says a little shyly. “We didn’t talk about children.”

Hugo’s mouth remains open. He looks shocked beyond words.

“Not a sip of wine all evening,” Sutton says in that drawl. “Even though I brought the Chablis because she loves it.”

“And she got emotional over the horse story,” I add. “Really, for someone who is famous for being able to read women, you completely missed this one.”

“We never have perspective about the people closest to us,” Sutton says, watching the embracing couple with satisfaction.

Hugo murmurs in French, sounding breathless and adrift. “*Un enfant?*”

“Are you angry?” Bea whispers.

She might be worried, but I can already see the stirrings of hope inside him. They may not have talked about children, but Hugo is committed to her fully. And a family is exactly what he needs to feel grounded in this life. He kisses her with a passion so raw and charmless it looks like a different man, one without an ounce of finesse. There’s only love.

“We should go,” I whisper to Sutton, who has already pushed back his chair. We make our exit with discreet haste, not a second too soon judging from the way dishes crash as the two move their passion to the top of the dining table.

I’m laughing with breathless anticipation as I collapse against the mirrored walls of the elevator. “She’s going to have a baby! Oh my God, we should make them name it Harper if it’s a girl or Sutton if it’s a boy. We were there when she told him.”

He does this silent huff of amusement. “Sutton is too rough of a name for any child of theirs. Maybe they can name him Harper, even if it’s a boy.

It works for both."

"I like that plan," I say, grinning because I can't seem to stop. I blame the wine that I was forced to drink since Bea didn't have any tonight. My heart beats fast and light, effervescent as a Chardonnay.

The elevator opens to the bottom floor, and I step out—my smile giving way to nerves. There are a hundred people milling around the lobby, but I might as well be alone with Sutton. The way he looks at me, it's like I'm the only woman in the hotel.

A couple in a hurry jostle me, and Sutton moves to block me with his body. It's only a small pain, the bustle from a crowd, but he takes it from me. There's a gentleman underneath all that laconic Southern charm, but it's different from Christopher. He doesn't claim to know better than me. He only wants to shield me from any pain. In some ways it's a subtle distinction, but in another way they're worlds apart.

"Invite me upstairs," Sutton says, his voice low and private.

"I don't think that's a good idea." The words come out unsteady, my body humming with anticipation as if I've already agreed to whatever happens next.

"A goodnight kiss," he says. "That was the deal."

My lips feel ultrasensitive, even thinking about kissing him. "You didn't really finish the story. We were interrupted."

"That's why you're going to invite me to your room. Where it's private."

A catch in my breath. "You're very sure of yourself."

He leans close, pressing me into a corner behind the penthouse's private elevator. The only people near us are passing by, on their way to a restaurant or a theater. "I've been poor longer than I've been rich, but you know one thing that stays the same?"

Sex, my mind supplies helpfully. *Sex is the same.* "No."

"People underestimate you because you're different, that's what stays the same. The way you looked at me and heard my accent and figured you could use me to get to Christopher."

"I d-didn't think—"

"Now look at you, so close there's only linen and silk between us, your cheeks all rosy, your eyes wide. You would let me do anything to you with people a few feet away, but I'm not going to touch you."

A sense of loss rushes through me, like a hollow opened up beneath an ocean. I may not have thought I was underestimating him, but clearly I had. “Come upstairs.”

Blue eyes flash with triumph. “Lead the way.”

Lead the way, because this is under my control. It’s up to me whether Sutton comes upstairs to my room, whether I use the key card to let us both inside, whether he wakes beside me in the morning. How would his body look, sated and tangled in white rumpled sheets? His skin would be leather-rough everywhere, exposed to the elements from a young age.

Or would he still be velvet and smooth in some places?

We take a regular elevator up to my floor, both of us silent in front of an older couple returning after an early night. The only place we touch is his palm at the small of my back—such an innocent place, that. There shouldn’t be a fire burning, spreading outward, down to my ass and between my legs. His gentle pressure shouldn’t make me think of other ways he could hold me.

Even when the older couple steps out, we don’t move from our assigned spots. My feet have become part of the floor, too heavy to move. He’s immobile beside me.

The dial that tells us which floor we’re on is made of a brass arrow and roman numerals. Nothing so coarse as a digital screen could grace this elevator. A low bell signals that we’ve arrived. The doors slide open.

It’s someone else walking out of the elevator with a warm hand at her back, another body that manages to put one foot in front of the other in high heels.

A baroque mirror hanging on the wall shows a pretty woman beside a man twice her size, his face set in stern lines. They look well matched in an unexpected way, small against his strength, delicate where he’s broad. *People underestimate you because you’re different.* He’s right about one thing. We aren’t the same. We’re two different elements: water and stone.

At the end of the hallway we come to my room. It’s cowardice that turns my face down so I can fumble blindly through my small clutch. There are twenty million cards in here, none of them the hotel room key. I’m running out of breath even though I’m standing still.

A hand covers mine, and I freeze. How is he so calm at a moment like this? Has he been to a thousand hotel rooms with a thousand other desperate

heiresses?

There are small white marks and raised lines. “Scars?” I whisper.

He knows what I mean. “Sometimes knives. Or barbed wire. A few wild animals have got their teeth in me over the years.”

“Is that a euphemism?” I still can’t bring myself to look him in the eye.

Especially when he laughs, low and rough. “Suppose so. You want to take a piece out of me, Harper St. Claire? I think you just might before you’re done.”

Then I do meet that blue gaze, because he has it wrong. “It’s the other way around. I don’t do… this. Whatever this is. I’m out of my depth here.”

It’s like ripping myself open, being so vulnerable with a man. I learned not to trust them early, from the men my mom married, from my father. Sutton could use this knowledge against me.

Those eyes turn dark with tenderness. And this, I realize, is what makes him different. This is the way that I underestimated him. Where he could have been cold and unfeeling, there’s this humanity to him instead. Humanity, but also pure male desire.

“We’ll start slow,” he says, and then his hand holds my face.

“Why me?” I’ve been pursued by men before, but never like this. “Is this some kind of competition thing? Because of my connection to Christopher?”

He gives a rough laugh. “Jesus Christ. You’re beautiful, smart, funny. Your connection to Christopher is the *least* interesting thing about you. I don’t give a damn who your stepbrother is.”

“I have to tell you something—” The words catch in my throat. “I think… what I mean to say is… I’m a little hung up on Christopher. I don’t want to be. I didn’t even think I was, but sitting there with you and Hugo and Bea, I realized it’s true.”

He’s laughing, the bastard, a silent, shaking kind of laugh. “Do you think that’s a surprise to me?”

I scrunch my nose. “It’s a surprise to me.”

“For your information I knew it as soon as you walked into the boardroom. It was clear from the way you talked about him, but it wasn’t going to stop me. Do you know why?”

“Because you want to have sex with me.”

A slow shake of his head. “I want to have sex with you so bad it hurts. It’s a distraction, the way my cock gets hard every time I look at you. The way I can’t stop imagining your breasts under those little T-shirts you wear. And that dress at the gala. It took every ounce of strength in me not to rip it apart with my bare hands, the Tanglewood Historical Society be damned.”

My breath catches. “A distraction.”

“A distraction, because I’m not only trying to have sex with you. I’m a direct man, honey. And I’m going to be direct about this. I’m courting you.”

“Courting?” My voice sounds faint. What an old-fashioned word. A lovely word. God, it’s a terrifying word.

“That’s what a man does when he’s determined and serious and wants a woman for his own. So yeah, you’re hung up on another man. You work on that little distraction while I work on one of my own.”

That’s the only warning I get before his lips cover mine. There are seconds that I could use to protest. *No, I’m not ready, wait.* My mouth is stubbornly silent until he finds it.

I gasp my surprise, but he swallows that down.

It feels good to be wanted, uninhibited, without a million reasons why we can’t be together. Without that unbreakable control that makes Christopher Bardot a man without weakness.

Of course I can’t deny that he’s part of this equation. He’s Sutton’s business partner. He’ll find out what we did, eventually. Will he feel regret? Jealousy? I hope so. Maybe that’s small of me, but there’s a much bigger part of me that wants him to finally, *finally* notice me.

Whatever I give Sutton he takes, even the trembling almost-kiss that seems to be all I can manage. If he really has been with a thousand other heiresses, they must know how to kiss better than this. I’m all rapid heartbeat and heavy breaths and sharp little whimpers.

He doesn’t seem to mind, shifting so his body is closer to mine, a steady presence that manages to soothe me. My back hits the wall of the hotel, and in the cool surface I can make out the gentle embossing of fleurs-de-lis. I’m the princess and the pea, my heated skin sensing even the slightest bump beneath layers of cloth. Who knew she was just turned on?

His hands are on my waist, and I have to move my body, have to gasp against his mouth, hoping he’ll understand. There’s an ache at my breast,

and the only thing that will fix it is his touch. He takes the permission with a groan of surrender, cupping me through the filmy fabric of my dress.

On his tongue I taste the wine and the chocolate we had for dessert. I taste the man underneath, something elemental and addictive.

My mind is cloudy with the sensation of him, his touch and his taste. His rough breathing, the proof that I'm affecting this powerful man as much as he's affecting me. I tug at his clothes, yanking at his shirt as if I can tear it away from his flesh.

"Slow," he murmurs, his voice rough. "Steady with you."

Like I'm a horse. The thought makes me laugh, though it's a little wild. He swallows the laugh, too, drinking me down like he's been dying of thirst. This stops being about Christopher Bardot and my revenge against his control. It starts being about the very male, very aroused body pressing against me, and all the elemental ways he wakes me up inside.

His thumb sweeps over the curve of my breast, searching, soothing, until my nipple becomes hard. And still he moves his thumb, back and forth, driving me insane. I make little whimpers because I can't do anything else; we could have done this downstairs. He's right. It's terrible, but he's right. I would have let him do anything, everything, if only it will calm this ache.

"Please," I say, panting, pulling at the buttons on his shirt. "Come inside."

He sinks his teeth into the flesh of my bottom lip, like a punishment, and I yelp because it only hurts when he pulls away. His eyes are a deep ocean blue, at the very bottom of the earth. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," I say, but it's really a hiss in the quiet hum of the hallway.

"Because we don't have to—"

"Oh my God, if you say that you know better than me, I'm going… I'm going to… I don't even know what I'll do, but it's definitely not have sex with you."

My head falls to the side, because I'm fed up with men who tell me what to do, fed up with myself, because I keep falling for them, and that's when I see his hand in a fist against the wall. All that frustration pressed against the pretty wallpaper, because he doesn't want to rush me.

It warms me enough that it's a surprise when his mouth nips my throat, making me jump. He nips me again, a little lower this time. And then

moves the edge of his teeth along my collarbone. There's something primal about him. Something dangerous and possessive, but he doesn't use his power to control me. He kisses me lower, between my breasts—and then even lower, on my stomach through the dress. That's when I realize he's on his knees.

Somewhere between the kissing and now, this man sank to his knees. He's on the threadbare carpet, looking up at me. It's like having a wild animal bow to you in the jungle. I'm panting, afraid to move.

"What are you doing?" I whisper, even though I want to say, *Don't stop, don't stop.*

"The goodnight kiss."

"We already did that." My lips feel swollen from what he did to me. It was more than a kiss, more than a claiming. He changed the molecules that form me, made me crave him. An ordinary peck will never be enough after this. Not when I know what's possible.

He shakes his head, slow and determined. "Not yet."

Without breaking eye contact he reaches down to the hem of my dress, pulling and pulling the fabric, revealing inches of my bare leg. It's indecent, what's happening in this hallway. At the very least we should be inside the room for this, but I can't bring myself to stop him.

The dress is held up in bunches, the delicate silk spilling from between blunt fingers. I know the exact moment when he sees what I'm wearing underneath—the sharp intake of breath. There weren't any panties in my carry-on bag to wear with this dress.

I only packed boring, utilitarian things to wear when confronting Christopher Bardot about my mother's hospital bill. There was no way I could have guessed that I would end up backed up against a wall by this man, my dress ruched up to my waist, exposing my bare pussy to the world—or at least anyone on this floor who decides to open their door.

They would be shocked to see me, not only my bare sex. They would be shocked to see the way my upper body leans against the wall, needing its support, one shoulder strap of my dress fallen loose, my eyes heavy-lidded with acquiescence to whatever happens next. There's a sense that I've done more than submit to him; that I've ordered him to his knees. Not with words but by need. Everything about his broad shoulders and his hard features speak of power, and it's an unspeakable thrill to realize that he bows to me.

God, what power a woman can wield.

One hand holds my skirts while the other runs up the outside of my calf. The inside of my thigh. His knuckles brush my sex, and I let my legs fall open. “Please, I need—”

“I know what you need.” His voice is like the rush of wind between two mountains, something that my body recognizes as eternal, that he was here before me.

That he’ll be here when I’m gone.

His fingers touch me with agonizing lightness, exploring, teasing. Letting me remain open for discovery. Is that part of what makes this hotter, knowing anyone might walk in on us? He has unending patience, even though I can see his arousal in the line of his suit pants where he kneels. I can see the arousal in the haze in his blue eyes, in the hard set of his jaw.

He’s like Atlas, cursed to carry the weight of the world. Strong enough to actually succeed in such an impossible task. Of course that makes me the world—and that’s how it feels, when he leans forward to place a chaste kiss on my thigh.

Higher, higher. He likes to tease me. There’s something playful about him that’s at odds with the burden he carries. Even the gods know how to make light of themselves.

And then he kisses my clit, and I lose the ability to think. My shoulders press into the wall. My hips push out toward his mouth. There’s nothing but his mouth and the magical things he can do with it. I cry out, and the sound of it echoes back to me in the empty hallway.

Even in this he has that terrible patience. That terrible playfulness that lets him nip at my skin, lets him tug and tease me until I’m shameless—pressing myself against his mouth, his nose, his chin, desperate for that friction my body demands.

His laugh surrounds me, piercing the madness that consumes me. “I should leave you like this,” he says, murmuring almost to himself. “You’d fuck yourself against the bedpost all night long, but it wouldn’t be the same. Wouldn’t be enough.”

“You wouldn’t,” I say on an aching gasp. “I’m dying here.”

He looks up at me, and it’s strange that he does have sympathy for me. It’s there in his blue eyes even while his lips shine with my arousal. “Are you?” he asks, his voice not shaking one little bit. Not like mine. “Or I

could lay you down on the bed and tie you there, so you couldn't get off. You'd keep trying all night, this gorgeous body fucking the air, desperate for relief. I could watch you all night."

"Nooo," I say, pushing my hips toward him as if that might convince him.

I'm beyond logic right now. Beyond anything but pure undiluted begging. I've never been more desperate than in this moment; this is what he's reduced me to. This is what he holds in his hands.

"Whatever you want."

And the bastard, he sits back on his heels. His hands fall to his side, somehow more powerful that way, his head looking up at me. He commands this hallway. This hotel. He commands the whole world from his goddamn knees. "Now you're ready to make a deal."

"Ruthless." The word spills from my lips before I've thought it through. I've known so many men who were ruthless, including Christopher, but never one who's managed to disarm me as much as Sutton Mayfair. That makes him infinitely more dangerous.

Casually he trails two fingers up my calf and back down. "Yes."

"Because you've been poor longer than you've been rich." It's made him hungry, and I can't really blame him for that. I've known what it was like to be poor, painfully poor, in small, infinitesimal drips. In the space between my mother's husbands.

"That," he says, with a faint dip of his head. "And because I don't underestimate you, Harper."

I swallow hard, because I've been underestimated all my life. Is that why he told me the story about the little boy who everyone underestimated? Suddenly that strikes me as totally unfair. "You didn't tell a secret about you. You told me a secret about a wild horse."

A faint smile. "The secret is that I wasn't the boy with a family and a ranch. I was the one who showed up with bruises. I was the one who tamed Cinnamon."

"No," I whisper.

"I told you, Harper. The story had a happy ending."

Touching him is as natural as breathing, as inevitable as the ache in my chest. Bristles on his jaw brush my palm. "I wish that hadn't happened to you."

“Maybe the moral of the story is that I can tame wild animals.” He’s a little mocking, making fun of himself. I’m the one worried that it might be true.

I snatch my hand away. It would be a lie to say I’m not a wild animal, since I’m considering scratching him in response to the ownership in his blue eyes. “I’m not tame.”

There it is again, that warm persistence that has made him rich when he was poor. It earned him enough money and know-how to partner with Christopher, a man who, for all his many faults, is admittedly a business genius. *Not yet*, he seems to say without words.

And I’m not entirely sure he’s wrong.

The elevator down the hall dings, and in a startled rush I push down my skirt. I expect to see the disgruntled businessman who’s staying in the room beside me or one of the other occupants I haven’t passed yet.

Instead Christopher Bardot steps off the elevator, his dark eyes narrowing on mine immediately, emotions flashing across his face before he manages to put a cold mask over them all. But I saw them. For that brief second I saw jealousy and anger, and something that breaks my heart—hurt.

In front of me Sutton moves much more slowly, getting up as casually as if he had been sitting at dinner, taking the time to straighten his shirt.

Then, impossibly, he runs a thumb across his bottom lip. And presses it between his lips to savor the taste of it. Of me. It’s the most explicit thing I’ve ever seen in my life, and we’re both fully clothed and covered.

Christopher’s eyes flash. “What the hell are you doing here?”

I’m not the kind of girl that men fight over, am I? I didn’t think so, but there’s leashed violence simmering in the air.

“Do you need it spelled out?” Sutton asks in that drawl I’m coming to realize is a sign of danger. The kind of danger that most people don’t expect from a Southern boy.

“What are *you* doing here?” I demand, because we’re in front of my hotel room. And what the hell does Christopher think, showing up here at night? Embarrassment threatens to strangle me, but I remind myself firmly that I’m a grown woman. I have every right to do what I want… even though I possibly should have been inside the hotel room.

It’s a question of a few feet, so I hold my chin up.

“I came to talk to you,” Christopher says in a low voice.

There’s a small move, barely discernible, the way that Sutton moves to block me. As if protecting me from Christopher. “You can talk tomorrow. At the office.”

“This is personal,” Christopher says, his eyes locked on mine.

He’s waiting for me to send Sutton away, except I’m not sure that’s what I should do.

If that kiss had been only for revenge, only to crack Christopher’s cool veneer, then it already succeeded. But Sutton made it more than that. He made it about me and him, when I didn’t think it was possible for me to desire another man.

“There’s nothing personal between us. You made sure of that. There’s only money between us.”

For all his rough background, Sutton wouldn’t do anything as uncouth as gloat. He doesn’t say a word or even move a muscle. He’s a monolith, but a sense of victory rises around him—unmistakable. I may as well have written his name on my body with permanent marker; that’s the way these men are taking my declaration.

Is that how I mean it? I don’t belong to Sutton, but God, I was never Christopher’s. Even in my teenage fantasies I should have known better than to hope for that.

“She’s my sister,” Christopher says.

A harsh laugh. “That would be more convincing if I didn’t think you were going to beat off to the image of her leaning against the wall, looking fucked out and hot as all hell.”

“Jesus,” Christopher says, baring his teeth to Sutton in a sign of frustration. “How dare you make this a competition? How dare you use her to get to me?”

The words find their mark inside my heart, sharp and poisoned. I don’t want to be a ball that men throw around for sport. A toy to be put aside when they get bored of me.

Where there had been victory, now there is only menace. How does Sutton manage to exude feelings without moving a muscle? His energy shimmers around him, thick in the air. And now he’s pissed. “How dare you imply that’s the only reason a man would want her?”

All the heat that had been burning through my body leaks into the walls and warms the floors. None of it’s left inside my body. I’m cold. “Is this a

game to you?”

I don’t even know who I’m asking. Probably Sutton. I already know what Christopher wants from me, and it’s to save me from myself. Not exactly a flattering sentiment, but a familiar one.

Sutton turns to me, his jaw hard. “He’s going to tell you I’m a bastard.” He cups my face, running his thumb along my lower lip. The same thumb that he used to touch my arousal on his lip. His head bends low so only I can hear what he says. “And he’s right about that. Because a better man would leave you to him. I want you for myself.” His mouth claims mine in a kiss that my body responds to even while my mind is confused. He explores me with sensual leisure, standing between Christopher and myself. There’s no doubt what my body wants when I look up at him with my lips parted and my eyelids heavy.

That’s how Sutton leaves me, leaning against the wall, my limbs weak and my mind hazy from wanting him—from wanting what he was going to do before Christopher interrupted us. *I could lay you down on the bed and tie you there, so you couldn’t get off. You’d keep trying all night, this gorgeous body fucking the air, desperate for relief. I could watch you all night.* It’s strange that he can make even torture a thing that I long for—that fact seems important. Momentous. Something about man and woman and the ways we break, but I can’t think about anything but the throb between my legs. And the hard look in Christopher’s eyes.

My purse must have fallen to the floor at some point. The cards are scattered across the worn carpet. And there is the hotel key card, the one I couldn’t find before.

Christopher is the one who bends to pick it up, gathering the rest of the contents in a broad sweep of his strong hands. He doesn’t bother handing the purse back to me, which is just as well since I don’t think I could hold anything. Instead he uses the key card to open the door, and holds it open for me.

How strange, that it should feel like a betrayal for me to be with another man when Christopher has rejected me for so long. And strange that he should still be bent on being the white knight.

My mind is too muddled to solve this, so I let him usher me inside. Let him pour me a drink of water from the minibar. Let him sit me down in a

chair while he stands in front of me like some kind of strict professor, his eyes intense and a muscle in his jaw ticking.

I know I should be thinking about the trust fund and hospital bills, but all I can hear is Sutton's voice saying, *You'd fuck yourself against the bedpost all night long, but it wouldn't be the same.*

Wouldn't be enough.

I'm used to the way Christopher distracts me, the way I can't seem to stop thinking about him even though I shouldn't. I'm less used to the way I can't seem to stop thinking about Sutton. What are these men doing to me? Despite all their differences, they fit together as business partners. Both of them are ruthless and so complex they're going to drive me insane.

"I know you hate me," Christopher says, and I don't bother to correct him. I'm not sure I could find the words. *I hate you so much you consume me. And now there's Sutton, doing the same thing. What will be left of me?* "And I deserve that."

"So you're going to let me pay the hospital?"

He gives me a severe look. "I'm being completely honest when I say that Sutton isn't good for you. Women love him and he loves them back… for about a week. Maybe two."

"Then this shouldn't be a problem for very long," I say, even though my insides squeeze at the thought of being pushed aside. It almost seems worth it, to experience the wild power of Sutton, even knowing that heartbreak is on the horizon.

"You should stay away from him. Go back to New York."

"Does ordering people around work well for you? Because I really want to do the opposite of whatever you say." I would have done the opposite anyway, but now I want to make a point.

He runs a hand over his face. "I'm trying to look out for you. Sutton uses people."

"You went into business with him."

Christopher holds the bedpost, a carved wooden bulb that makes me think of dirty things. Maybe I'll always look at bedposts differently now. "That's exactly why I went into business with him. Because I'm going to succeed no matter what. No matter what some society thinks about my plans."

I shake my head, remembering when I saw him in his cabin on the yacht, head bent over his textbook late at night. He's always been driven. And clueless. "You really do need me."

"I don't need anyone."

The words ring in the silence that follows, an explanation of what came before and foretelling of what happens next. It's the heart of this man, his determination not to need anyone. Even the people who love him. That's what I felt for him, once. It took me years to admit it to myself, the reason why I could never get serious with a boy after him.

"Well," I say softly. "Regardless of whether you need me, here I am. I'm going to do the job Sutton's given me, and then you're going to pay for that butterfly garden."

A notch between dark eyebrows. "Tell me why."

"That was the deal," I say, deliberately avoiding the question. It's easier to deal with Christopher when he's purely hypothetical. Harder when I place the issue in front of him. He becomes flesh and blood. Vulnerable. Fallible. I don't want him to be wrong, because I'd hate him. I don't want him to be right, because I'd have to stop hating him. And that would mean facing what he means to me, which should be nothing at all.

He growls. "You know what I mean. Why do you need to pay for a damn butterfly garden when she's in remission?"

"You must have been keeping tabs on her to know so much."

"Apparently they left something out."

His bluntness makes me laugh, though nothing is funny right now. "There's a pretty high chance that it will come back, and then we'd have to do it all again. The radiation… God, it nearly killed her on its own. She won't do it again. She already said so."

He stares for a moment. "She'll change her mind."

My stomach clenches, because that's what I want. "Contrary to what you think, people don't work like machines that do whatever you program them to do."

"She'll change her mind if it's the only way."

"You don't know her," I say sharply. "And you sure as hell don't care about her, so don't pretend to me. But there is another way. There's an experimental treatment. A study that's already full, but they're going to make an exception."

He makes a rough sound. “Oh, that’s rich. Trading the chance to live for a new goddamn butterfly garden. Very noble of them.”

“That’s the way the world works. The only reason they even made me the offer is because they knew I could afford it. Or at least they thought I could.”

Christopher turns away, looking out at the dark window. It’s too reflective, showing his silhouette and my shoulders at the forefront of the city. “I didn’t know.”

“It doesn’t change anything, though. Does it?” He’s still not going to let the trust fund pay for the butterfly garden. It has nothing to do with money.

Everything to do with control.

He swings back to face me, at least doing me the courtesy of looking into my eyes when he shakes his head. “No. I can see why that made you grateful to Sutton, the offer he made, but he’s doing this for our project. Or to get under your dress.”

It doesn’t even occur to Christopher that he’s basically calling me a prostitute, suggesting that the only reason I let Sutton touch me is out of gratitude for a job. There’s no anger in me, because even though Daddy made me messed up about men and money, he also helped me understand them.

“What I do with Sutton is my own business,” I say, before adding, “You made sure of that when you pushed me away after the will reading.”

His throat works. “I shouldn’t have been so hard on you.”

That makes me smile, bittersweet. There’s an old thread in my chest, worn and threadbare, one I could have sworn was broken years ago. Trust for the man named Christopher Bardot, that thread. It tugs in this moment, somehow still there. “Oh sure, you should have. Your goal was to make sure no part of that stupid crush survived, and it worked.”

“I do… care about you,” he says in the most awkward declaration ever.

And then I have to stand up, because I’m not the woman who’s going to take orders from this man. He would have to work a hell of a lot harder than that. It makes me angry to hear these things I would have swooned over four years ago. Where was he, then? It’s too late now. I’m older and wiser. And a hell of a lot more guarded. “As a sister?”

He shakes his head, eyes glittering. “Never.”

“As a friend?”

There's an unsteady laugh. "You were more of a friend than I deserved."

There's too much of the old Christopher in those words. Too much of the boy who looked up at the Medusa painting with awe for me to breathe easy. It makes me want to push him away.

"If you wanted to have sex with me," I say, running a finger down his white collar. "You only had to ask. When I was on the yacht. Or in front of that Medusa painting. I would have done it, Christopher. Don't you know that? I would have done anything you asked."

"Hell," he says, tight and broken.

"I think you did know, but you walked away."

He looks furious. And despairing. "It was never simple between us."

"So don't you dare show up now and tell me who I can touch. If I want to let him press me up against the wall, if he gets down on his knees and puts his mouth on me until everyone on this floor knows what we're doing, that's my business. You had your chance."

My body heats at the words, at the remembered pleasure of Sutton's mouth on my sex. Christopher looks down at me, as if he can feel the heat emanating from between my legs. His expression turns stark, as if he's in pain. That's only fair, because I'm in pain too.

"You deserve better than that," Christopher says, but there's no way to pretend he's talking about Sutton. He's talking about himself and we both know it.

"He gives me what I want, which is something you might try next time you like a girl."

"It wasn't that," he says, harsh again.

"No?" I step forward and place a hand on his chest, feeling the way his heart beats strong and fast. He may want to be unaffected by me, but he isn't. I tilt my face up toward him. "You didn't imagine me naked in the cabin later?"

He sucks in a breath. "You were too young then."

My words come out as a whisper. "What about now? Will you do what Sutton said—imagine me in this dress when you go home after this?"

"It's not fucking decent," he says, even though the silk covers every part of me. It's a perfectly respectable dress, when it's not hitched up around my waist.

“You can thank Sutton for this,” I say, because it’s true. He’s the only reason I lean forward and place my lips against Christopher’s, touching them in some terrible attempt to show him what he gave up, to prove to myself that I don’t care about either of them.

Christopher sucks in a breath. For a second I think he’s going to pull away. He stiffens and grasps my hair with his fist. Easy enough for him to stop the kiss. Instead he dips my head back and deepens it, exploring my mouth with his teeth, his tongue. Opening me wider until I whimper. Pulling me close until I can feel how hard he is beneath his slacks.

His other hand fists in the gauze of my dress, and I realize he’s holding me with both hands clenched—one in my hair and one in my clothes. I don’t know whether he’s doing it so he doesn’t have to touch me or because it’s a way to control me without bruising me. He uses both hands to tug me closer; I’m pressed so tightly I can’t imagine getting away.

Where Sutton had been raw sensuality and playfulness, Christopher is pure determination. He kisses me like he’s a conquering army, like I’m made of gold he has to grasp—or lose forever.

I push away from him with a pained cry, because I want to stay in his arms. I want to let Christopher take me to bed and show me how much he can conquer, his way made slick by my arousal for another man. “You should go.”

He pants, his pupils large and dark. “Let me stay. I want to taste you.”

The words are like a cold splash of water on top of my head. Taste me, like Sutton did in the hallway. Taste me after Sutton challenged him that way. Am I only a competition between two business partners, who probably compete over more than women?

This is exactly what I always wanted, having Christopher beg for a night with me. Exactly what I always dreamed, but I can’t trust it. Not when I wanted him to find out about this. Maybe not by walking into the hallway, but I knew he’d eventually find out I kissed Sutton.

Some female part of me knew exactly what I was doing, even if I couldn’t admit it to myself. Now it’s worked, and it’s a hollow victory. Like giving him a love potion and then preening when he falls for me. It isn’t real. None of this is real.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I manage to say. “Bright and early. We can work like people who need money and not from a trust fund. Like people

who didn’t almost have sex the night before.”

He flinches, which is what I wanted. For him to feel as cold as I do. “Harper.”

“No,” I cry, losing my tenuous grip on composure. “You had your chance with me. Now you don’t want me to be with someone else?”

“It’s not about that,” he says, but he’s a liar. Like the man on the plane with a secret girlfriend in New York all those years ago. And like Daddy.

That’s what men know how to do: make money and lie to women.

“Get out,” I say, turning away. I’m not even angry with Christopher. I’m mad at myself for letting him in the room. For letting Sutton walk me here. For trusting them even when I don’t have any reason to. Because that’s something women are good at: loving men we shouldn’t.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

WAKE-UP CALL

I OPEN MY eyes and stare at the chandelier lit by sunrise, wondering where the hell I am and why I'm awake. Then the hotel room phone rings again. Briefly I fantasize about throwing it across the room. Or maybe attempting to flush it down the toilet.

Instead I answer with a sleepy, "Hello."

"Mademoiselle St. Claire, this is your requested wake-up call," says a voice in lightly accented French. It makes me wonder if L'Etoile hired him only for that accent. They do love ambiance. "At six o'clock. Would you like us to send breakfast?"

"Coffee," I manage to croak before letting the receiver roll out of my hand. It hangs over the side of the bed, because I'm too exhausted to pick it up.

In my defense I've been a college student and an artist for the past few years. Being Instagram famous doesn't exactly require waking up early. I know without asking that the men will be awake early, regardless of what happened last night, and I'm determined to pull my weight, to actually earn the money they're damn well going to pay me.

I drag myself out of bed and into the shower, where a spray of hot water finally lures me into consciousness. While I'm inside, I hear the room service knocking.

"Coffee," I tell the shower wall, and it echoes the word back at me, sounding relieved.

I'm in my towel when I open the door.

Sutton looks ridiculously fresh and awake at this ungodly hour, his suit crisp across his broad shoulders, narrow at the waist. His only saving grace is the cup of coffee he holds, the white lid and green stirrer keeping the heat and steam inside. It's not from the hotel, this one.

“Bless you,” I tell him fervently, taking the coffee and backing up.

He steps inside with a grin, with absolutely zero shame in his blue eyes as he takes in the tops of my breasts above the towel. “A very good morning.”

My body responds as if he just stood up after kneeling at my feet, his hands on my thighs, his mouth on my clit. Sparks between my legs. Heat in my breasts. My nipples turning hard against thick cotton. “How did you know I’d be awake?”

“I was hoping to find you still in bed,” he admits. “I would have joined you.”

“You’re only a few minutes late for that.”

It’s a struggle to take the little green stirrer out without letting the towel drop, but naturally he doesn’t help me whatsoever. He’s not quite a gentleman.

Not when it means he can see my skin covered in droplets.

“There’s always tomorrow,” he says. “I was going to drive you over to the library, so you can see what’s there before I show you the plans.”

The coffee burns down my throat, the perfect blend of sharp and sweet. “If you bring me coffee like this, you can take me anywhere you want.”

A knock comes at the door. “Room service.”

Sutton gives my body one last look, his blue eyes tinged with regret. “You should probably get dressed. I’ll get the door.”

It’s with a sense of disappointment that I retreat to the walk-in closet, quickly dropping the towel and sorting through the clothes that are in my luggage. It would be nice to have a power suit or something equally professional, but instead I’ll have to settle for a flowing sage green skirt and a white T-shirt that says, *You should see my active bitch face.*

A quick brush of powder covers some of the freckles that make me look twelve years old. And there’s nothing to be done about my hair, which falls damp and sea-blown no matter what I do. There’s a mirror on the door, and I look at my hazel eyes, wondering what Sutton sees in them.

Sutton uses people. That’s what Christopher said, as if I didn’t know what men want from women. Even if I’ve never had sex before, that doesn’t mean I’m totally naive to their ways. I’ve been to plenty of frat parties. Walked in on one of my professors and his student, once.

And there was that husband of my mother’s, the one who climbed into my bed.

I know what men want from women; I’m only surprised that a man like Sutton wants it from me. Does he think I have more experience than I do? It might be a disappointment when he finds out I can paint a siren better than I can be one.

Sutton reclines on the armchair in the corner, scrolling through his phone. There are probably a hundred emails in his inbox. Phone calls to return. Or maybe he’s looking at his bank balance, counting the money. That seems like something an ambitious man would do.

He looks up, and nothing about his expression changes. At least not that I can discern, but there’s a sense of amusement glinting in his eyes. “You are the most interesting woman I’ve ever met, Harper St. Claire.”

“Oh good,” I say, picking up the coffee he brought me. It’s infinitely stronger than whatever the hotel has in that silver carafe. “I thought you wanted me to be sexy, which was nerve-racking. The interesting thing I’ve been doing for years.”

His lips press together like he’s holding something inside, which I’ve already figured out is an unusual look for him. He says what he’s thinking.

“What?” I say, looking down at my shirt. “Too much?”

He barks a laugh. “God, woman. You’ll be the death of me.”

“Now you’re just being cruel.” I grab my clutch from the nightstand. “Let’s go.”

He follows me, muttering to himself and shaking his head. “Not sexy? If you were any more sexy, I would come in my goddamn boxers.”

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CHAPTER NINE

TWO-MILLION-DOLLAR BATH

I EXPECTED A hollowed-out building, maybe one of those abandoned spaces where the earth has started reclaiming the land with ivy grown over cracked concrete. There are enough old places in the west side of Tanglewood for that to be possible.

Instead I find a grand old building with cornices and ionic columns and a wide bank of brass doors set in thick wavy glass. Inside there's a marble entranceway and a dome stained-glass ceiling. Only a few panes are broken, petals in the flowers that let in shards of sunlight, illuminating a wealth of dust floating in the air. The whole place is done in an art deco style, original work with brass cage light fixtures and stylized roses in the marble floors.

High wooden countertops line the entrance, where intrepid old Tanglewood citizens would go to ask questions before you could ask Alexa anything on your Amazon Echo. Behind the counter is the focal point, a wall carving that's two stories high—a collage of waves and sky, square-faced men wielding tools and working with the land. It's a story of triumph, that carving. Even an inch deep in dust and with a bird's nest hanging loosely off one of the men's eyebrows, it takes my breath away to look at it.

And through a great curved hallway, shelves and shelves of books.

"Oh my God," I whisper.

"It's something, isn't it?" Sutton says, sounding reluctantly impressed. "Apparently they ran out of funding to pay the librarians, so they just shut the doors one day. Didn't bother to sell off anything inside or use the building for something else."

I wander over to a circular file which has little printed cards where people could write requests. There's one sitting with a half-sized pencil, the words *Crossing the Rubicon* written on it. They really had locked the doors without any notice or closure.

One day there was a functioning library. A center for knowledge and community.

And the next day, nothing.

I whirl on Sutton, remembering what he told me. "'This is more of a teardown and rebuild.' That's what you said. Are you insane?"

"There's no money in a library," he says, his voice gentle.

It makes me think that maybe he mourns the loss of this place, too. Not enough to go easy on him, though. "No wonder Mrs. Rosemont was pissed at you. This is a travesty."

"That woman has enough money to have restored the library herself if she cared about it that much. It's convenient that she's worried about it now that I own the deed."

"You and Christopher," I remind him. "You own it together."

He laughs. "If Christopher had his way, we would have had a wrecking crew already through here. He doesn't see anything of value between these walls."

There's an uncomfortable symmetry between this old building and me. "And what about you? Do you see any value here?"

He looks up at the broken stained-glass windows, his handsome face in silhouette, revealing a place in his nose where it once must have broken. "It's a beauty, that's for sure. I thought it would be enough of a tribute to build something grand in its place."

"That's not a tribute. That's—that's—"

"A travesty," he says, his voice dry. "You mentioned that. There was an option in the construction plans, an idea I had once to keep the walls and the doors. Even the old style, but most of this would still be cleared to make way for the stores."

"The stores."

"It's going to be a mall. We may not understand the way society ladies work, but we know enough. If there's a Jimmy Choos over where the picture books are, they'll come shop."

"I resign," I say, tossing the empty coffee cup into a trash that's half full with crumpled paper. "And I'm joining the Tanglewood Historical Society."

Sutton doesn't look alarmed by my declaration. Instead he seems pleased, maybe even a little smug. Typical man. "I knew you were the right person for the job."

“Because I’m quitting?”

“Because you aren’t going to let us screw this up.”

My skin prickles with that sense of a role reversal again, that Christopher is always trying to save me. That Sutton thinks I can save them both, instead. “I’m serious, though. This place is like magic. You can’t turn it into a mall.”

“We aren’t a charity,” he reminds me, but his voice isn’t a reprimand. Instead it’s like we’re brainstorming, so I let him lead me deeper into the library. “This has to make money or we just took a two-million-dollar bath.”

“No one needs to be that clean,” I agree, secretly shocked that they had poured that much money into this place. No wonder Christopher’s so bent on starting construction. It would take a serious overhaul to turn this place into a shiny mall with luxury shops.

Sutton pauses to look at a row of plaques that has the names of old families. The brass is tarnished and green now. This is what’s become of their legacy.

I walk past him to a great hall that contains books in rows and rows. The dust is dense here, without even the broken stained-glass windows to let in fresh air. It tickles my nose until I sneeze, disturbing the layer of gray on a book beside me. I touch the old cloth spines as I pass, taking away a smudge of dirt with my forefinger, leaving a trail where I’ve been.

The rows are even enough to follow, but the signage less clear. There aren’t any signs above each row to say what’s inside. You’d have to ask one of the long-gone librarians to find anything. I keep walking, gradually coming to understand the system for things. Fiction and nonfiction. Memoirs and reference materials. There’s a large section on history, which is super meta considering this building has become a slice of the past.

My finger touches books that haven’t been read in years, their pages silent in this tomb of a library. Books about the medieval times and the ancient Vikings.

There’s a section about Greek and Roman history. There are a few books I skimmed through in Smith College’s library. Ancient history doesn’t change that much.

One catches my eye. *The Goddess of Egypt*, it says, with a stylized painting that could only be Cleopatra. At least they’ve drawn her without

the asp wrapped around her arm, but she has the classic heavy eyeliner and seductive pose. The Mona Lisa smile.

I flip it open, which sends a cloud of dust into my eyes. They're watering by the time the page comes into focus. The text is small enough to need a magnifying glass, but a sentence in this random place jumps out to me.

It's a testament to female power that she was able to create a shadow of her own beside two men of incredible ambition and renown.

Two men of incredible ambition. I have a little experience with that after last night, though I'm not sure how much of a shadow I create myself. I'm not sure I *want* much of a shadow, considering we know the tragic end that Cleopatra met. History wasn't kind to women who held beauty and power. I'm not sure the present is much kinder.

"What do you think?" comes a low voice behind me.

I gasp in a mouthful of old air and cough. Sutton stands too close to me, his body warm and imposing, somehow making the aisle shrink. "I think you surprised me."

"You fit here, which is strange."

"Strange because I know how to read?" I ask tartly.

"Strange because you're the epitome of the modern woman, but you look so comfortable in this stuffy old library. I think you'd fit in anywhere, wouldn't you?"

"That comes from moving every few months," I say, the words out before I can call them back. I don't usually share that with anyone. Definitely not a man who thinks I'm beautiful and mysterious. "Not that I minded."

He looks grave. "Are you going to settle down in New York?"

That's where most of the people I know have moved. Or places farther away, like Milan or Bombay. Places to inspire an artist's heart. I never told them that I long for something simpler. Something more like an old library that hasn't been touched in forever.

"Maybe." I snap the book shut and carry it to the front.

He follows, a little bemused. "You're stealing a book."

A gasp of outrage. "I wouldn't steal. I'm checking it out, obviously."

"Should I go behind the counter, then?"

“No one would mistake you for a librarian,” I say, glancing wryly at the elegant lines of his suit. How such a large man manages to move gracefully is something physicians can study. Something old Greek artists would have tried to carve out of marble.

I push aside a swinging wooden door to go behind the counter myself. There’s a time capsule back here, papers in stacks moved only by the wind from above. Old stools with the leather worn, probably old even when the library closed. What had the librarians done when they closed the doors? Had they mourned this place? Someone should have.

Sutton follows me behind the counter, his blunt fingers moving along a carving in the back wall. Leaves create a forest wall made out of mahogany. A place for a tired librarian to lean against between moving stacks of books around.

Finally I find the little cards that they would fill out to lend a book. There’s a place to write the full name and address of the person. A place to write the book information. An optional ten-cent donation check box. Sutton joins me, placing his hand on my waist—such a small touch. It shouldn’t make my heart race.

“Look,” I say, showing him. “You can earn back your two million with this.”

He bends close, his blond hair more golden in this dim and dusty light. “How many books would we have to lend? It’s not as fast of a return as we hoped for.”

A sense of lightness invades my chest because he plays along with me. Does that mean he respects me more or less than Christopher, who rejects my ideas right away? I’m not sure either of them see me as an equal, but they both want my body.

Looking down at the cover of Cleopatra, the artist’s rendition of an overpriced prostitute done with childish ideas of Egyptian fashion, I wonder if that’s all we ever have.

Sutton turns his face toward my neck, breathing in. I turn toward him, my mouth only a few inches away. We could kiss in this place, and it would be almost sacred.

He pulls away, only an inch. Enough. “We can go to the office,” he says, his voice rough. “I’ll show you the plans and then we can talk about next steps.”

So businesslike, those words. Next steps.

I turn so that the counter is against my back and I'm facing Sutton. He could step back, if he really didn't want this. If he didn't want me to grasp his red tie and pull. If he didn't want me to push up on my toes and kiss the corner of his lips.

He groans and opens his mouth over mine. His tongue touches my lower lip, my tongue. He touches me in intimate, warm places, and I can only think about him kissing me between my legs. Especially when his palm lands heavy on my thigh.

"Here?" I ask, but it's not really a question. It's more of a command.

His hands grasp me in a brusque motion, pushing me so that I'm sitting on the counter. My legs open with a naturalness that surprises me, and he moves between them. Even with the way his waist narrows, he spreads me wide. His demanding kiss pushes me back, only an inch, enough to unbalance me. My hands fall back to catch me on the dusty stacks of paper.

"Here," he says as if it's an order.

Both of us know by now that it's acquiescence. He's put me in charge of this thing we're doing, made me the goddess of this ancient library. It makes me feel powerful when I grasp his hair and hold him steady, biting his bottom lip.

His hips jerk, as if against his will, pressing something hard and long against the inside of my leg. It makes me bite him again, harder this time. How does he do this to me? Make me vicious. As if something dangerous inside him calls to me.

And I know that he's strong enough to take anything I give him.

"Do you think," I say, gasping, "there were librarians who did this?"

He moves his mouth to my jaw, making my skin oversensitive with his lips. "God, I hope so. It would have been a travesty to have this counter and not use it."

When he brushes his teeth along my collarbone, I let my head fall back. I look up at the broken windowpanes, at the too-bright sun. "I didn't come last night."

"No?" he asks, nipping at the upper curve of my breast. "You didn't have Christopher finish what I started? You didn't tell him to get on his knees for you?"

“He—” I have to pause and search for words as Sutton pushes his hand, blunt and urgent, beneath my panties. “He wanted to.”

That makes him push his clothed cock against me, same as the bite. He likes it when I’m rough with him. We’re both animalistic this way, here in this abandoned place.

“Would you touch me now if I’d let him?”

“Hell yes,” he says, his voice a grumble, those blue eyes narrowed. “I’d show you that I can make it better. I’m not afraid of competition.”

“You like it,” I say, panting.

“Yeah,” he says, and his fingers find me wet and swollen. His lids lower. He presses an open-mouthed kiss on my belly. Lower, lower. “I like competing. You gonna make me fight for it, honey?”

It’s probably wrong to answer yes. There’s some moral weakness inside me that only came to the surface when Christopher showed up at L’Etoile last night. “Would you win?” I whisper.

“No chance in hell I’m letting this sweet pussy get away.” That drawl becomes stronger when he’s turned on. It makes me want to push him further, to see how heavy and thick he can sound. So I spread my legs wider, using my heel on the counter for leverage, pressing myself against his mouth. He grunts his appreciation, spearing me with a blunt finger, and then two. His hand twists and does something inside me, something that makes my mouth fall open.

He pulls back enough to watch his fingers, in and out, in and out.

“Don’t stop,” I moan, pushing my hips against the air.

He laughs against me, the breath of it a terrible tease. “Did it hurt last night?”

“Evil,” is all I can say, especially when he presses a small kiss to my clit.

“My dick hurt like hell,” he says, rubbing his thumb against my clit. “Couldn’t jerk it because it made me wonder if you were with him. So I had to lie there hard as a fucking rock all night, waiting until it was morning.”

“I’m sorry,” I say on a moan, but that’s a lie. The same way he lies to me. I’m not sorry he hurt for me; it feels like the only compensation in this whole confusing situation. That his cock throbs and aches and wants the way my body does.

“You will be,” he says, his voice low and hard-edged. “You’ll be sorry when I spank your ass pink with one of these books. Then maybe you’ll know better than to tease me.”

Surprise squeezes my lungs, because I’m pretty sure he’s only pretending. Or maybe he’s really going to punish me. My body doesn’t seem to care, because I gasp and writhe in his hold, fighting him in this maybe-game we’re playing.

Large hands grasp my hips and flip me over like I weigh nothing. Then I’m bent over the counter where a hundred books must have been lent over the years. A thousand books. More?

I’m defiling all of it with my breasts pressed against the dusty wood and my hands clenching in old paper. He picks something up; I feel the whoosh of air where I’m exposed. I tense, but nothing hits me.

“Don’t worry,” he says in that hard-edge voice that means I should be very worried. “I’m going to warn you before I do it. I want you good and afraid.”

“I’m afraid,” I whimper.

He shows me the book he has—there are stacks of them haphazard on the counter, books that were returned but never shelved, forever in purgatory. It could have been any one of them, but of course it’s *The Goddess of Egypt*. Stylized Cleopatra looks back at me with her mysterious eyes and knowing smile. I’m going to paint her. I’ll have to paint her, in some way other than in that seductive pose they always use. Maybe she’ll be bent over a table, her body shaking in almost-real fear at the man behind her.

“Ready, honey?” he asks, soft. And I know this is the time when I can speak up. *Don’t hit me. I don’t want that. I’m not that kind of woman.* But if there’s anything last night showed me, it’s that I don’t know what kind of woman I am. Maybe none of us really do until we have two men fighting for us. Maybe there’s a Cleopatra inside each of us.

“Ready,” I whisper.

The book makes a whistle sound in the air. It winds something up in my body, something that only springs loose when a flat pain echoes through me. I cry out, more from the surprise than the hurt. A large palm molds itself to my ass, soothing away whatever sting was left.

Another whistle; another cry.

It isn’t harder than the jolt of a roller coaster bar against my stomach. It’s not the pain that makes this good; it’s knowing that he’s doing it to me. I’m in this powerless position, because of my lust, because I chose this. Because I chose *him.*

His fingers find me again, slick and ready. It only takes the barest twist, the smallest circle around my clit before I’m coming apart, my legs shaking, every muscle clenched. Pleasure saturates my mind like the yellow-orange rays of sunlight at dawn, breaching the horizon.

The book drops beside me, right in my line of sight. He wants me to see it.

To imagine the imprint of my ass on the old glossy cover.

A small tear behind me, a rustle of cloth. I clench harder on the papers in my fists as if they’re rope instead of pointless forms.

He’s probably good with rope.

Yes yes yes. He’s so good with it he doesn’t need anything as primitive as fibers and knots. He has me tied down to this counter with pure force of will—not even his own. Mine. It’s my desire that keeps my breasts against the wood, that keeps my ass in the air while he strokes me with callused hands. “One day we’ll have to try a bed,” he says in that voice that pretends to be unaffected. As if I can’t feel his cock throbbing against my thigh.

“Later,” I manage to say in a voice just as bland. “To spice things up.”

A bark of laughter echoes through the library, sending a bird from its nest of dictionaries and Dickens, a flurry of feathers through the largest broken window. My gaze follows the path, even when there’s a wide heat pressing between my legs.

Even when I moan in sudden panic.

He seemed big when I felt him through his slacks, but I wasn’t specifically worried about size. Nature has its own geometry, doesn’t it? That’s what I thought, but now I’m less sure.

He pauses, easing a large hand along my lower back. Settling me back down. “Do you need to come again?” he asks.

The question is so casual, so kind, that I’m struck by my own inexperience. That I could do this in an abandoned library, bent over the counter, with a man who is technically my boss.

“Maybe,” I say, but the word is high-pitched and uncertain to my own ears.

A long silence speaks volumes, like the books that surround us, spilling secrets for anyone who pauses to listen. Or anyone bent over a desk, a heavy hand on her lower back, legs shaking.

"Goddamn," he whispers, and he sounds just as unsteady as me.

"Are we still going to have sex? Because if not, I think I should probably be standing for this conversation." I'm babbling a little. Nervous. *Exposed.*

There's no hurry at all in his movements. He pulls me up and sets my clothes to rights, using hands that don't tremble and a body that doesn't shiver every two seconds. Then he pushes me back so smoothly that I barely realize I'm sitting on the counter again. Mostly I'm sure of it because it no longer feels like I'm about to fall down.

"I don't want…"

He studies me with infinite patience, his blond hair ruffled. Did I pull his hair when he knelt in front of me? Or is that a natural disarray that happens when he has almost-sex? His voice is calm and solid as an oak tree when he asks, "Don't want what?"

"Don't want you to protect me. Don't want you to be the hero and protect my stupid virginity, which is just a social construct, by the way. It doesn't mean anything."

"Harper."

"It's not something I need to be protected from, like it's 1580 and I'm a maiden and my virtue has to be guarded by the men in my family." And I'm so, so tired of being protected by Christopher Bardot. Protected by my father. Protected by these formidable walls I've built so I don't get my heart smashed to bits.

"*Harper.* I'm not protecting you."

"And it's not like—oh. You're not?"

He laughs, a little rueful. "I'm protecting myself if anything. How do you manage to seem so damned experienced when you're a virgin?"

I make a face. "What does that even mean, experienced? I have life experience. Having a dick inside isn't some kind of transcendent experience. Only a man would think so."

"Only a virgin would think it doesn't matter."

"Look," I say, feeling a little manic. Because maybe I had always imagined it would be Christopher. That seems impossibly naive in the light

of a broken stained-glass dome. “I wasn’t saving myself for marriage or anything dramatic like that. I just wanted it to be the right place and time. Like an abandoned library, apparently.”

“Like eight a.m. on a Friday.”

“Apparently,” I say, trying to sound worldly. “Maybe I’m a morning-sex kind of girl. I’m not usually awake in the mornings, so I never knew that about myself. See, you do learn things in libraries.”

Sutton picks up the book about Cleopatra and hands it to me. “Come on.”

“More spankings?”

“No,” he says, very severe. Very angry about the virginal spankings. “We’re going to the office, where I’m going to show you the damn blueprints.”

“Work.”

It’s a relief that he’s focusing on work instead of sex.

And a terrible disappointment.

I think out of any man in the world, Sutton Mayfair is the only one who could make me forget about Christopher Bardot. For even two seconds, forget about the man I’ve been in love with since I was fifteen years old. It’s an allure to someone who’s been trapped for so long. A shiny key dangled in front of someone who’s been behind bars.

“You have a lot of work to do if you’re going to convince the historical society to let us raze this place down.”

“You’re not razing anything,” I say, pushing off the counter and pointing a finger at his chest. “And don’t look smug. I’m still turned on, but I’m choosing to ignore that for now and focus on the fact that this library is going to be restored.”

“Libraries don’t make money,” he reminds me, his voice gentle.

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CHAPTER TEN

GOING OUT OF BUSINESS

I'M ON THE phone with Avery that afternoon, having seen enough architectural diagrams of a modern monstrosity to last me a lifetime. It would be a beautiful mall, one I'd love to shop in if it were located anywhere else in the city.

"What about a bookstore?" I ask, sketching out a Cleopatra reading a book with that Mona Lisa smile on her face. Why can't she look any other way but sultry?

"Oh, that would be cool," Avery says, because she's that kind of friend. Supportive, even when you have dumb ideas. "Aren't bookstores going out of business, though?"

"There's really no way a bookstore can earn back what they put into it, not even if they sell a thousand books a day. Besides, it wouldn't be the same."

"The same as what?"

"This library… I wish you could see it. You'd just die. And probably find some out-of-print book about Helen of Troy to make you have an orgasm right on the spot."

"Mmmm," she says, sounding a little orgasmic at the idea. "What if you create a little museum section in the mall, where it shows some of the old books?"

"So people can put down their slushies and pretzels on the glass case?"

"I don't understand why they even bought a library."

"For the location. And a total lack of respect for old books. They think the mall is going to be some kind of commercial revival for the west side."

She's quiet for long enough that I know she's holding out on me.

"Spill."

“Maybe it really would be good for the city,” she says in a rush. “The books aren’t doing anyone any good collecting dust. An influx of cash from the rich side of the city might be exactly what the west side needs.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Gabriel.”

“And you still have the books,” she says. “You could sell them and use the money to create a new library. A smaller library that has books and a computer lab.”

“Way too much time with Gabriel. Now you’re practical and boring.”

“I forgot to mention you’re on speakerphone.”

A smile takes over no matter how hard I fight it. “I’m sorry, Gabriel. But I’m sorry in that way where I said something true and I’m only sorry you heard it. You’re rubbing off on her.”

“That’s my favorite thing to do with her,” he says, his voice far from the phone.

It makes me laugh, which is what I needed.

Gabriel is a good man, even if he did buy my best friend’s virginity as revenge. These things happen. The important thing is that he loves her. She only has to blink at something and he’ll pour his fortune into buying it for her. I’m almost certain they won’t end in tragedy, but you never really know with love.

That’s why I’m better off without it.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THIEVES CLUB

THE DEN IS a place owned by a criminal and bastard, so naturally it's spilling over with patrons when I show up at ten p.m. They wear suits and party dresses, laughter and drinks flowing freely when I step into the foyer. The crowd here is younger and more playful than the gala, but just as rich. Just as powerful in their own corner of the city.

From across the room I see Hugo with his head bent, speaking to Christopher and another man with a shaved head and muscles like whoa. I've never met the third man before. He stands and approaches the bar area, so I sidle up to him.

"Hi," I say, dropping my rose-gold clutch on the mirrored surface.

He looks at me sideways. "Who are you?"

There's a natural command in his voice, the kind that can only come from having been in charge of men for a long stretch of his life. Military? It's in the way he holds himself. "A friend of Beatrix Cartwright. And Avery James."

His eyes are a darker blue than Sutton, more midnight than ocean. "Ah."

"Ah?"

"You're the artist. The one Sutton talks about."

"He talks about me?" My voice comes out high-pitched, because I don't know whether he talks about what happened in the hallway or what happened bent over on the counter. Either way my cheeks burn hot in the company of this stranger. He's wearing a wedding band and he doesn't seem the least interested in me sexually, which only makes it more embarrassing somehow.

"You're going to save the library."

"Oh," I say, relieved. "I'm not sure how, but that's the plan."

“Christopher’s going to lose his shit. It was his idea to raze the whole thing down. I think that’s the only way he knows how to make something successful.”

Is that what he’s trying to do with me, tear me down to my roots, to the muscle and bone, to build me into a woman he might actually trust? “That is weirdly insightful, stranger. Almost like you know Christopher really well, but I don’t know you.”

The corner of his mouth twitches. “Blue Eastman.”

“Your name is Blue.”

“Yes.”

“Like it says that on your birth certificate. Blue like the color.”

He laughs a little rusty, like he’s not used to doing it. “That’s right.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t really move on. Was Green in the running? If you had been born with green eyes, would you be named Green?”

“Probably.” He pauses, accepting a beer that the bartender sends his way. “Do you want anything? Sutton will be annoyed at me that I bought you a drink.”

“An old-fashioned,” I tell the bartender, a pretty young woman with strawberry-blonde curls and twinkling eyes. “And I’m paying for it.”

Blue takes a sip of beer and then considers the amber liquid. “My father had brown eyes. Black hair. My mother had dark skin and even darker hair.”

“Babies have blue eyes,” I whisper.

“Not in my family. At least that’s what my dad said, for all that he didn’t know shit about genetics either. So he named me Blue to punish my mother, to always remind her that he knew.”

“Wow. Did she actually…?”

“Until the day she died, she maintained that she had never cheated. Which either makes her a dedicated liar or very bad chooser of husbands.”

Love is a terrible monster. It seduces you like a siren, pulling you closer even though you know you’re going to be smashed to bits against the rocks.

“I’m sorry.” What a terrible way to grow up, knowing that every time your parents looked at you, they were thinking about an indiscretion that may never have happened. Finding the proof in your appearance. “No wonder you left and joined the army.”

“That obvious?”

“Pretty much. But what I don’t know is how you know Christopher. He’s not exactly the hoorah, my-biceps-are-bigger-than-yours type. I say that with complete respect, because your biceps are definitely bigger than mine. And also everyone else’s.”

“We’re… friends,” he says, the word almost foreign on his lips.

“I didn’t know he had friends.” Except for Sutton, though I wouldn’t have used the word *friends*. They’re business partners, sure. Enemies maybe.

Blue nods toward the group of armchairs in the corner where Hugo and Sutton are still talking. “The four of us. I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but we sort of ironically, but not ironically, call ourselves the Thieves Club.”

“Is it because you steal jewelry at galas? I’m not judging. Anyone would consider it. There’s a ridiculous amount of diamonds in a single room.”

“It’s something Hugo said a long time ago. That every dollar earned was a dollar we took from someone else. Whether we returned a service for that money is beside the point. The amount of money in the world is finite.”

There’s a rush of air, and then Christopher is on the other side of me, having appeared like some kind of magician. The breath whooshes out of me for a solid five seconds, and when I breathe back in a gulp, the air comes flavored with him—crisp and dark and always so damned comforting when I shouldn’t be comforted by him.

“Until the government prints more,” he says, the educated economist inside him sounding like Daddy, which unnerves me and comforts me even more. Goddamn it.

Blue tips his glass of beer in greeting. “Though if we took those freshly minted dollars, we really would be the Thieves Club.”

“We’ll call that plan B,” I say, accepting my old-fashioned from the bartender with a murmured thanks. “The gala seems like an easier mark, really.”

Christopher is faster than me, sliding a twenty across the mirrored counter before I can pull money out of my clutch. It makes me scowl at him, because it’s an extension of the way he tries to control me—handing out and withholding money according to his own code.

“I’m not grateful,” I tell him, taking a gulp of the drink.

“I don’t expect you to be,” he murmurs. “But you don’t need to think about stealing. You’re one of the richest women in the country.”

Blue seems to have evaporated, probably returning to the group of armchairs in the corner. I can’t seem to take my gaze away from Christopher’s dark eyes to check. There’s something different about him tonight, but I can’t figure out what.

He looks a little less forbidding.

“A lot of good that does me,” I say.

“If you help us push this project through you’ll get the money you want.”

I look down at my drink. Now I understand why men do this, the broody, staring-at-alcohol thing. It’s a moral dilemma, because if I push the project through, I’ll help Mom. But I’ll also destroy something beautiful in the library.

“Sutton told me,” Christopher says, reading my mood correctly. “You’re your father’s daughter. You know there’s no way to make money back on a library.”

“Maybe it can be like the Den. You could serve alcohol at the counter while you check out books. And people could discuss philosophy and sex like a modern-day French salon.”

“It works for the Den because Damon Scott runs it. It’s basically headquarters for his criminal enterprises. Laundering money and selling weapons isn’t in our business plan.”

“He doesn’t sell weapons,” the bartender says.

Christopher gives her a small smile. “You would know.”

She smiles back with a nod that makes her look like royalty. “I like the idea of selling alcohol at a library. I’d buy a glass of wine to sit with a book, but I’m not sure it will make the kind of money you’re looking for.”

“This is Penny,” Christopher says, giving enough weight to the name that I should know who she is. “She’s with Damon Scott. Though I haven’t seen her behind the bar before tonight.”

“I’m trying my hand at mixing drinks.”

“You’re good at it,” I say with a rueful glance at my empty glass.

She laughs, a tinkling sound. “Thank you. Anyway, it’s a good place to eavesdrop on people. That’s probably why Damon started a bar in the first place. He sells information.”

“I don’t suppose you’re looking to get into the information business?” I ask Christopher hopefully, even though I wouldn’t like him half as much if he did. He operates on his own code of honor, which is warped and broken but comes from a good place.

“Fashion and trendy electronics at a high markup would be preferable.”

“I could buy it from you,” I say, which suddenly seems like the best idea. “It would be my personal library, so it follows the rules of the trust fund. And I’d give you whatever you paid for it. More, even. So it would still make money for you.”

“That’s assuming I would sell it to you,” he says, almost gently now. That’s what’s different about him. There’s no derision in his expression. Less coldness in his voice. He’s almost, *almost* human. And he sounds apologetic, as if he wished he didn’t have to disappoint me.

“I’m not going to beg.” Mostly because I know it won’t do any good with him. I’ve already tried that, when I was far more desperate than I am now.

“I’m not selling it, for many reasons. The location of the library was calculated based on many different factors. We won’t find another place ripe for gentrification like this one.”

“Why do you care so much about gentrification?”

“Because it’s going to make me a rich man.”

“If you had two million dollars to put into it, you’re already a rich man.”

“One million,” he says. “Sutton put in the other half. And a million dollars doesn’t make you a rich man in this economy. There’s more in the trust to maintain the damn yacht.”

“Good Lord. How much does it cost to wax the deck?”

Christopher gives me a half smile that looks so much like him as a college boy that my heart skips a beat. “That depends on how shiny you want it.”

“The library is a monument to knowledge and community and the irrepressible spirit of mankind. You can’t just tear it down and build a mall.”

“Malls are irrepressible. And profitable.”

There’s no way I can save the library. Failure makes my chest feel tight, which isn’t a totally new feeling. Especially when I’m in Christopher’s

presence. Why do I always feel crushed when he walks away? And why do I keep seeking him out, even though I know how it will end?

I can't save the library, but the worst part is I'm not sure I can save the mall project either. We would have to convince the historical society to let us build it.

Another cocktail appears in front of me, sent by the too-knowing Penny with sympathetic brown eyes. I take a large swallow of my cocktail, enough that even this top-shelf liquor makes my throat burn.

"You can use the office," Christopher says. "Invite them over and show them the plans. I don't mind letting them see, but I'm not going to change a damn thing."

"There's the spirit of compromise and community that will endear you to them."

Penny shines a perfectly clean glass with a rag, managing to look conspicuous as she does it. "I don't mean to interrupt, but I've met some of the women in the historical society."

"Are you friends with them?" I ask hopefully.

"I wouldn't go that far, but I like to think I know how they operate. And if you bring them into a boardroom and show them documents that are already drafted, they're going to say no."

"That's what I'm thinking, too. And the worst part is I don't totally disagree with them. It's a gorgeous building. It should be lovingly restored, not torn down for the land."

Christopher gives me a dire look. "And Sutton asks why I don't think it's a good idea, you being our liaison with them. Maybe because you're not on our side."

"I'm not on anyone's side," I tell him, annoyed. "I'm on my own side. There's only me on this side. You and Sutton, you're not invited."

A smile plays on Penny's lips. "Did you hear about the show that's come to the Grand? It's sold out on Broadway, with limited tour dates, so it's a coup that we got a stop. One night only. Tomorrow night."

The implications run through me like warm water. Mrs. Rosemont may have asked to hear details about the project, but it won't help to show them to her. Those councilmen that are holding the permits in perpetual review? They'll nix them for good. "So everyone will be there. Can we get tickets?"

“It’s been sold out for weeks. Damon and I have been looking forward to it since we heard. And I happen to have a couple of extra seats in my box.” She glances sideways where Sutton sits, watching us now with an unreadable expression. “Only two, but we know the owners of the theater. They’ll let us add another chair to the box.”

“Thank you *so much*,” I say, clapping. “This will be perfect.”

Christopher sounds droll. “I don’t suppose you’d accept money in exchange for the seats.”

She laughs. “Of course not. You’ll owe us a big favor, because if there’s one thing Damon Scott loves collecting more than information, it’s favors.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

GOLD STANDARD

"HE HAS *FRIENDS*," I tell Avery, on my bed and staring up at the chandelier hanging from the ceiling. I took a cab back to L'Etoile, refusing to let either Sutton or Christopher bring me home.

"He's probably had friends before."

"I don't know." I remember how he looked bent over his textbook, forlorn and serious and determined. "He may have given his textbooks names and had whole conversations with them."

"You just never lived in the same city as him," she says.

"Did you know about this Thieves Club? That's what they call themselves, Sutton and Christopher and Hugo. And this man whose name is Blue, like the color."

"Because they steal jewels from the bank?"

"That's what I asked!" This is why talking to Avery grounds me. She understands me like no one else. Besides she asked for the scoop, which is only fair since she gave me the tip about going to the Den. "Apparently it's because every dollar they earn is one taken from someone else and money is finite or something."

"Hmm," she says. "So he has friends and you met them. Does that mean he's human now, instead of a big symbolic version of your dad you can hate?"

"Don't psychoanalyze me," I say in a singsong voice. "Two can play at that game and you *sold* your virginity in a public auction, so you're always going to be weirder."

That earns me a laugh. "So you're going to the theater tomorrow."

"And I still have no idea what I'm going to say to Mrs. Rosemont. *Hey, the library is a gorgeous piece of history. Can we have your blessing to burn it down?"*

“Burning it seems inefficient. Won’t there just be a wrecking ball or bulldozer or something?”

“In my head it’s going to be burned like the libraries at Alexandria. And then Christopher will fire me. And Sutton will spank me. And my mom probably won’t even do the experimental treatment even if I can get the hospital to let her in after this.”

“There will be other libraries,” she says gently.

I swallow down the acid that threatens to come up, ruining the pretty lace bedspread. “You’re right. The treatment is the most important thing.”

This reminder could not be more important. The treatment is more important than making Christopher Bardot jealous. More important than seeing if Sutton Mayfair can be the man who might actually replace him in my heart. More important than the library and painting and anything else in the world. That’s the kind of focus that gets things done.

It’s the kind of focus that’s kept me alive in the cold years since the will reading. Having some goal set for me, however impossible it seemed. Making a living for Mom while going to college. Finding some peace despite the mockery the media made of us.

The butterfly garden was a natural extension of everything that came before. Useful and elaborate and slightly over the top.

There will be other libraries. “Is this how men feel when they sell their morals?”

“It’s how I felt,” she says, and I know she’s thinking of her time at the Den.

“I’m sorry. I wish you’d have come to me then.” She’s able to laugh about it now, mostly because that’s how she found Gabriel Miller. It was terrible at the time.

“And I wish you would fly to the Emerald right now instead of going there tomorrow. We can eat popcorn and watch *Mean Girls* and talk about how boys suck. And then you can tell me about Sutton *spanking* you, which I did not overlook by the way.”

“There was possibly a thing with a dusty old book.”

“Oh my God.”

“And a library counter.”

“So you guys are officially… you know. Doing it.”

“We’ve done some things,” I say, as breezy as if I’ve done every single thing on the sexual menu. Repeatedly. “Not all of them. He’s very skilled with his hands. And his mouth.”

Avery doesn’t precisely know that I’m a virgin.

She thinks I’ve had sex because she knows I go into bedrooms with frat boys and let them hang socks on the door, so it’s a reasonable assumption. But I’ve perfected the art of listening to their troubles and keeping all my clothes on. I’ve also perfected the art of a hard kick to the balls in case one of them gets particularly persuasive.

Like I told Sutton, I don’t think one particular act matters that much. I never thought I was saving it for marriage, but in my head, when I touch myself at night, it was always a dark head of hair and black eyes that looked down on me. Always the same.

No matter how much I hated him, Christopher was always the gold standard.

“He’s fun to play with while I’m in town,” I say, still casual, because I’d like to have casual virginity-removing sex with Sutton. Then I can stop the stupidity of imagining Christopher being my first. “Not anything serious.”

“Oh my God, Harper.” She sounds scandalized. “Two men?”

“No,” I correct sharply. “There’s only one man. Even that is temporary.”

Temporary, the word my mother used to describe my father’s wives. And her husbands.

Nothing lasts forever.

“Two men,” Avery says, insistent. “There’s always been something between you and Christopher. Mostly you two have never stayed in the same city long enough to do anything about it. And now he’s seeing you with his business partner…”

Seeing me with my dress up around my waist, my sex exposed in the hallway while his business partner licks my pussy. “Nothing is going to happen.”

“But call me when it does.”

“I’m literally never going to call you again, because nothing is going to happen.”

“Okay,” she says, not believing me for a second. “Talk to you tomorrow.”

I hang up with an exasperated smile, tossing the phone onto the nightstand. I'm feeling a little punchy without any of my supplies with me, but I don't want to make a trip to the art store.

For one thing I don't think the concierge would take kindly to me splashing oil-based paint all over their antique furniture and old wallpaper. I also don't want to imply, even to myself, that I'll be staying in Tanglewood for longer than a few days. I'll sort out the issue with the Tanglewood Historical Society and be back in LA with my mother and her new treatment and my brushes.

The only thing of interest in the hotel room is the book on Cleopatra, which is more interesting than the cover could possibly imply. There's intrigue in here about her life, going beyond her experiences with Julius and Antony. Chapters and chapters from before she was ever a glint in their eyes. The making of a powerful woman, through the only means available to her.

Those men, who wanted her for her body. And her mind?

Did they think they were in love with her?

She was more than a pretty face to them, this much we know. They used her, and she used them back. And in the end she outlasted them both, so maybe that's the moral of the story.

It ended in tragedy for all three of them, though.

Maybe that's the true moral of the story.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MY FATHER'S DAUGHTER

THE GRAND FITS its name with a gorgeous fountain in the front and ornate carving along the front that's been lovingly repaired with plaster. Old trees surround the property like an embrace. A thick red carpet covers the cobblestone close to the entrance.

"See?" I tell Sutton, who looks ridiculously handsome in a suit. "This is how you treat a place with history. You don't blow it up into a million pieces."

"We aren't going to blow up the library," he says, that rough voice underlaid with amusement. "And besides, I don't think this is the example we should follow. The Grand used to be a strip club."

Through an arched doorway I can see gilded wood box seats and a wide stage. "And you know this by rumor only, I'm sure. It's not that you would have gone to a strip club yourself."

He laughs in a fully masculine way that does not confirm or deny anything. "I work with the construction company that did some of the restoration."

It's almost impossible to believe that this place was anything but a theater. It's cleaner and more elegant than some of the theaters I've been to on Broadway, which maybe isn't saying much. "Some businesspeople clearly value culture."

"Ivan Tabakov values beautiful women," Sutton says. "Especially the beautiful woman he married, who was herself a stripper until they converted it to a theater. Or back to a theater, I should say, since that's how it started."

"That's what the mall would be," I say, quiet so only he can hear.

"A strip club?"

“I’m not judging the women who worked here, but there’s a reason they converted it back. Because desperation and money and sex are not the answer.”

“Hey,” he says, laughing silently. “Leave sex out of this.”

I look at the ceiling, at the dark wood beams and the faded pink textured wallpaper. They’re original to this place; I can feel it in my bones. “I’m not bashing malls or strip clubs,” I say, still looking up. “I’m not even bashing money, but it’s a problem when you have to destroy something beautiful to have them.”

When I glance back at Sutton, his expression is grave. “What other beautiful things have you seen destroyed?” he asks softly.

I don’t answer him, but I think he already knows. My mother’s dignity. My own innocence. The better question is, what beautiful things does money *not* destroy? It touches everything with its dirty hands, marking us, leaving us weaker than before.

“There they are,” he murmurs, nodding toward a box to the right of the stage.

It’s the one with the best view, of course. The best view of both the stage and the rest of the theater. Seats fit for royalty. Penny transformed from a bartender in a crisp white button-down to a gorgeous asymmetrical lilac gown of different textures. The man beside her must be Damon Scott, the angles of his face severe as he surveys the crowd.

And beside them is Christopher, murmuring softly to Damon. Probably making a backroom deal. That’s why men come to these things, isn’t it? It’s an excuse to do business.

Of course I can’t blame the gender, since that’s why I’m here.

“Wait,” I say, when Sutton moves to escort me toward the stairs. Half the seats are full with people settled in, chatting and flipping through the program. The other half of the seats are still empty, waiting for the people who are milling around or still out with their glasses of champagne.

It takes a few minutes, but finally I spot Mrs. Rosemont when she turns to glance up at the balcony. She’s sitting with an older man who I’m guessing is her husband. They have seats right up front. Not quite as glamorous as the box seats, but definitely expensive.

Sutton gives me a curious look but lets me lead us down the row toward them. Maybe he thinks I’m going to sit down and have a chat with her

about the library in the ten minutes before the curtain rises, but I'm about two percent more subtle than that. Instead I stand in the aisle, half turned away, flipping through the program they gave us at the door.

Finally the couple beside the Rosemonts stands and makes their way to the exit, probably taking a potty break so they don't have to stand in a monumentally long line during intermission.

"Excuse me," I say when they reach us, sounding nervous and flushed, which isn't that difficult since I'm trembling. "I know this is forward of me, but my brother's in the show tonight."

I spin a story of my brother, the understudy, who's been part of the cast since they started touring. But this will be his first show. They gave us seats, of course, but they're all the way up in the boxes. I want him to be able to see me when he looks out at the audience. There are little touches I pulled from the program—a name of an understudy and the part he'll play.

The woman looks only a few years older than me, and not particularly pleased at the idea of switching seats. She seems the suspicious sort, which is reasonable considering I'm conning them. It's when the husband sees exactly which box they'd be in that things change.

"Is that Damon Scott?" he says, trying to hide his excitement.

"Oh, he's very kind. He's the one who gave us the seats. But my brother will be disappointed if he can't see me in the audience. I promised to wave at him."

So that's how we end up sitting next to the Rosemonts.

I can feel Sutton shaking with laughter beside me, but he manages to hold any words inside. "You hired me to do a job," I tell him under my breath. "I'm doing a job."

"I have no complaints," he murmurs, his hand finding mine.

I let him hold my hand because that's the part we're playing for Tanglewood society right now. Not because it feels warm and comforting for him to rest my palm against his. Not because it's strangely sensual for him to rub his thumb along the outer edge of my hand.

The lights dim without me exchanging a single word with Mrs. Rosemont. We watch the show, which I fully intend to enjoy since I haven't seen it yet. The rave reviews are fully deserved, and I'm laughing and gasping along with the rest of the audience.

She notices me first during intermission, but I'm careful not to look her way. I feel her think about saying something to me two different times. *Didn't we meet at the gala?* she would ask.

But she's silent and so I don't say anything either. Patience.

It's in the final act that things really progress, and by that I mean—I cried. Twice. The show is a gorgeous tragedy, and there are tears streaming down my face. The program is clenched in my hands, almost torn apart by the strength of my emotion. Sutton looks stoic beside me, but I know he's moved by the way he holds my hand.

Mrs. Rosemont is crying, too. When the curtain falls and the actors take their bows, she and I are among the first to rise to our feet, clapping our hands as hard as we can, trying to convey everything we felt and lost and learned in such a basic, universal sound.

It's only when the lights go up again, and everyone streams out the doors, that she turns to me. "You're the one who wants to tear down the library," she says, her eyes tinged red.

"I don't." Lying works well for getting someone to switch seats with you. For something like this, honesty is the only way. "I'd love to restore the library, to see it in its glory."

"Then how can you…" She glances at Sutton but must think better of what she's going to say about him. He sits with his ankle over his knee, looking supremely relaxed and confident in a theater. He would look this way in a stable or a boardroom. That's because it comes from inside him, that certainty that he's right where he needs to be.

"I love the library, but it's not doing anyone any good with all the books molding and the wood rotting. And no one, not Bardot and Mayfair, not the city of Tanglewood, is going to pay the small fortune it would cost to repair it."

She sniffs. "That doesn't mean I'm going to condone a mall."

"What I'm proposing is something that will benefit the city of Tanglewood, the *history* of Tanglewood, more than an abandoned building ever could."

The wrinkles around her eyes deepen. "What is your plan?"

"We go through the books. Find the ones that are worth keeping and the ones that aren't. Donate the ones of value to the Tanglewood library system for distribution or display."

“That’s not enough.”

This feels like more than an interest in historical restoration. It feels personal. “Tell me why,” I say. “Tell me why the library is so important to you.”

She studies the velvet curtain, clearly deciding how much to tell me. Secrets are a form of currency. “I went to that library as a child.” A pause. “It was more than a place for books, you understand. It was the place you could learn things, no matter what family you came from. No matter how much money you had.”

“There are other libraries.” It’s strange feeling to argue against myself.

“Not like that one.”

“Not like that one,” I have to concede. “But the books can be restored and find new homes in libraries around the city. Bardot and Mayfair would be honored to fund restoration of some of the best pieces, for better preservation and display.”

She mulls that over, her shrewd eyes on the curtained stage, probably imagining how it would look. Not only the value, but the fact that the Tanglewood Historical Society had managed to secure it for the city. It would be a win. “I’ll have to talk about it with some of the others. I’m not making any promises.”

“There was a library I went to,” I tell her, cashing in my own secrets. The times between husbands. “We mostly wouldn’t talk to the librarians unless the computers broke. The machines told us where to find books. Then one day I went in and there was a brand new book about Leonora Carrington, the glue still tacky where they’d put the library label on. I could barely find a few lines and one photo of her work in the other books.”

“An artist?” Sutton asks, his voice soft.

“A painter. A surrealist.” None of those words accurately convey what she meant to me. “She painted mythological creatures, but they’re… they’re these radical statement about existence, about transformation, about sexuality. She’s the reason I believed I could be a painter.”

Sutton makes a small sound and squeezes my hand.

“But there was nothing—no store where you could walk in and buy a book about her or a print of one of her paintings. It was like, in the world of money and power, she never existed.”

I don’t share that she was expelled from multiple schools for wild behavior. That she was a revolutionary and a vocal feminist. Her family never understood her desire to be an artist.

Sometimes it’s an act of rebellion to simply exist.

“My father was a carpenter,” Mrs. Rosemont says, her throat working. “Kitchen cabinets and basic furniture, that kind of thing. He never made anything artistic at home. I wouldn’t have known it was even inside him, if it weren’t for the library.”

A thump in my heart. “He made the wall?”

“They paid him twenty dollars for the whole project.”

“Oh my God. I can’t believe your father made that. It’s incredible.”

She shakes her head. “It broke my heart when they shut down the library. But it’s always been there. Waiting, I think. Waiting for someone who cares enough.”

I look at Sutton, who’s watching me with unreadable blue eyes. He’s waiting for someone who cares enough, maybe. Waiting for me. We might not be able to save the whole library, but we can save the wall. And it will be better—much better to preserve it properly than let it sit in that dusty, abandoned space, exposed to the elements through the broken glass dome.

“As it happens the extraction and transportation of walls has been a subject of particular interest to me. And Sutton’s a carpenter, too. I’m sure we can find a way to pull them off the building and move them… ” Where? “Maybe a museum.”

“City hall,” Mrs. Rosemont says, and I know we’ve won.

Sutton gives me a small nod of agreement. We still have to convince Christopher, who I think will be less amenable, but I have to believe I can do it. There’s a cost to what I’m proposing, but nothing in life is free. Being a stated supporter of the society will mean the project has their backing. It might even help smooth along some of the red tape.

This is the way business is done.

Like Christopher said, I am my father’s daughter.

Mrs. Rosemont nods once. “I still have to discuss it with the other members, but this might be the best option. We’ll be in touch with some specifics.”

That’s a nice way of saying she’s going to make us bleed through the nose for some expensive book restorations, but I can’t really blame her. My

job is far from done. There will be more negotiations, but this is a solid start.

Sutton stands. “Shall we?”

He helps me up, but my foot has fallen asleep from sitting too long. I stumble a little against the chairs in front of me. It’s Sutton who helps pull me upright, Sutton who keeps me that way when my leg threatens to give out again. Sutton who leans down so that his face is only an inch away from mine, an intimate pose considering we’re sitting in one of the front rows of the theater.

Most of the seats are empty now anyway, but there’s one man at the back. In the shadows. Of course he would be there. I recognize his silhouette immediately. Christopher must have come down from the box seat and waited for us.

I lean on Sutton as we make our way to the back.

Vaguely I’m aware of Mrs. Rosemont and her husband trailing after us up the long carpeted aisle. We’re almost completely alone in such a large space. The stage is silent after being so full of life for the past three hours. Through the archway I can hear the buzz of voices, people excited and a little tipsy, but they seem far away.

Even a few feet away from Christopher, he’s too dark to read. I can feel the tension radiating off him. Is he worried I said something wrong? He steps forward, only half a foot, and I can see his black eyes flash with fury.

“Christopher?” I say, suddenly uncertain. It had felt so natural to make a deal with Mrs. Rosemont with Sutton beside me. This is what I would have done for my father, if he had lived long enough to use me for this. It’s what I was born to do.

“I’ll take you home,” he says, his voice so low it’s almost guttural. The sound of a cello in the orchestra pit, foreboding and grave. It means the main actor is in trouble.

Sutton’s hand tightens on me, and I realize what this is. Another one of their damn pissing matches. I’m not even sure it matters who I am—it could be anything they’re pulling between them. “I’ve got her,” he says, nice and quiet. Lethal in a different way.

“This wasn’t a date,” I whisper. “I’m not going home with either of you.”

Christopher looks away, his jaw ticking. “Of course. We can go to the office instead. You can give me the rundown of what you promised Mrs. Rosemont.”

I take a step back, stung. “We can do that tomorrow morning. And hopefully by then you’ll have cooled down enough not to speak to me like I’m a child.”

A dark gaze slides down my body. The emerald wrap dress suddenly feels like nothing. “You’re not a child, Harper. You know exactly what you’re doing.”

The man was saying a thousand things with the innuendo in his voice, none of it good. I’m struck speechless a moment, wondering how I got to this place. Wondering how I can say anything at all when my throat itches and burns like I might start crying—for a third time tonight.

It’s Sutton who steps forward. “I don’t know what the hell’s wrong with you right now, but you’re going to walk away before I remind you how to speak to a woman.”

There’s nothing leashed about the violence in his voice. He’s about one second from punching his business partner in a public place, even if we’re mostly alone.

Mostly, except where’s Mrs. Rosemont? Is she seeing this?

“Let’s go,” I manage in a harsh mutter, though I’m not sure whether I’m talking to Sutton or Christopher. Maybe I’m only talking to myself. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“Hell,” Christopher says softly. “I’m sorry, Harper.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I lie, because it does. There’s a hole in my heart that proves it does. “We can talk about the library tomorrow.”

He gives a hard shake of his head. “Not that. I’m sorry about the trust fund. I should have let you do whatever the fuck you wanted with it. I shouldn’t have let a dead man control you.”

There’s too much to take in, the fact that Christopher is maybe softening toward me after years of being a hard-ass. The fact that he called Daddy a dead man. Because it wasn’t Daddy controlling me, not really. It was Christopher, all along.

I take a step back, away from him. Away from Sutton.

I’m halfway ready to run down the velvet-covered aisle, to climb onstage and through the curtains. Into a fictional world that’s just as tragic

as my own.

Christopher steps forward, fully in the light, and I realize that he's more than soft. He's drunk. That's why he's saying this. That's why he's being a man I don't even know.

A man I wished existed for so long, it's painful to see this parody of him now.

"Damn you," I whisper.

It happens so fast. Christopher reaching for me, his eyes almost translucent. Showing me things I've always wanted to see, a longing so deep it reaches through my ribs and squeezes.

And then Sutton blocking him, a swift arm to keep me safe.

I can't even tell who swings first, not really. A scream escapes me when I see Christopher's head knocked back in a punch. Then he swings at Sutton. Soon they're on the carpeted floor, rolling around, their black-and-white suits flying, their eyes fierce as animals.

It could have lasted an eternity, that fight.

Or maybe only a few seconds.

Other men come and tear them away. Dimly I recognize Blue as one of them, looking fierce. And another man, his face so hard-set he looks like stone.

There are tear tracks down my cheeks.

I notice them only when they feel cold in the theater air, the rest of my skin flushed. Finally the men calm enough that they are let loose, both of them panting and bloodied. "This is what we've come to," I say, soundless so no one hears me.

This is what we've come to, because of money and sex. Maybe it was inevitable that I would make the same mistake as Mom, but twice as bad.

Two men to trample my dignity instead of one.

Through the shimmer of tears I see Mrs. Rosemont's face pinched as she looks at Christopher and Sutton. I know what she sees. Two men who are out of control.

And the woman who made them this way.

Our eyes meet, and she lifts her chin. *The deal is off,* those shrewd eyes tell me from across the room. No amount of book restorations or carving installations will save us now. No amount of money will repair the trust we've broken.

I should have let her go, but I imprinted early on humiliation.

“Wait,” I tell her, wiping my cheeks, useless because they must be streaked with black. “I’m sorry. Don’t judge them by this, please. It was a bad night. A strange night.”

“I’m not judging them,” she says, her voice as stiff as starch. “I’m judging you.”

“Yes,” I say, pleading now. “It’s my fault, not theirs.”

I don’t actually know whose fault it is or if blame is a thing we can own. It doesn’t matter, because my heart is with Christopher and his ambition. My heart is with Sutton and the wild horse he tamed. My heart is in that library, but even that I was willing to give up for these two men. Of course it’s love. Only love could hurt this much.

“I was young once,” she says. “So I’ll tell you this. Sometimes you need to walk away. Maybe you don’t see it right now, but those boys are dangerous. They will tear apart anything in their path to get what they want. Even you.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MR. VALEDICTORIAN

BLUE OFFERS TO take me back to the hotel, but there's a pretty young woman with tired eyes and a large, pregnant belly who waits to the side, so I tell him no. Penny also offers to escort me back, but Damon Scott kind of terrifies me, which is saying something considering the two men who fought each other in front of me.

Sutton's lip has been split, but when I reach up to hover over it, he doesn't flinch. Still in shock, maybe, like he's fallen into the bay and been dragged out. Or maybe he's fought too many times in his life to be shocked anymore. "I'll take you home," he says.

I swallow hard. "I'm not… I'm not the kind of girl that men fight over."

He shakes his head, a quick dismissal. "That says more about us than it does about you. And nothing good, that's for damn sure."

"Does that mean you're going to apologize to him?" Christopher stands only six feet away from us, leaning against the curved stone edge of the fountain, staring out at the city's skyline. It shouldn't be possible to see his expression in this darkness, but I can tell from the set of his shoulders that he's melancholy. It makes me long for the hard-edged, cold Christopher.

The one who breaks my heart but doesn't look melancholy.

"No," Sutton says. "But I'm not going to punch him again. Not tonight."

"I suppose that's the best I can do, but I can't leave him like this. I'm pretty sure he drove here."

Hard blue eyes study the solitary figure. "We can call him a cab."

When did it become Christopher against me and Sutton? Maybe from before I even met Sutton. I would have aligned myself with anyone against Christopher. Does that mean what I have with Sutton, this connection, the invisible string that draws me toward him, isn't real?

“I can’t leave him here,” I say finally, resigned that I won’t figure out the secrets of the heart tonight. “The way he is now. There’s too much history.”

A sleek black limo glides into the courtyard. Sutton’s limo.

I put my hand on his arm, feeling the restraint in his muscles, the heat of his body. “It’s okay. I’ll take an Uber with him. You don’t have to do anything.”

He looks increasingly remote, the more I try to reassure him. “Bring him.”

Into the limo? Sutton may have promised not to punch Christopher again, but I’m not sure putting them in a closed metal box going eighty miles per hour is the answer. “We couldn’t.”

An impatient wave of his hand. “It’s the fastest way. The safest, too.”

I can’t argue with those points, and I don’t really relish waiting for an Uber in the dark, making small talk with a random stranger—or Christopher, who seems like a stranger.

He looks up at the stars as I approach him, unmoving even though he must hear my heels on the cobblestone, the red carpet rolled up and put away until there’s another show.

“Come on,” I say softly. “Let’s get you home.”

“I’m not drunk,” he says, gesturing to the sky as if that proves a point.

“Well, you’re not sober.”

“Go on ahead. I’m not good company tonight.” A humorless laugh bounces off the stone and water of the fountain. And abruptly falls silent.

I put my hand on his arm, feeling his muscles—so different from Sutton. Sleek where he’s bulky. Tense where Sutton is deceptively casual, reserving his strength for when he needs it. “I don’t have a red and white life preserver, but there’s a limo that will work just as well.”

He glances over. “Don’t think Sutton would appreciate that.”

“It was his idea.”

Christopher remains still, considering. I wonder what scales are in his head right now, weighing the cost of being near me and Sutton. Weighing the return on investment of a ride home.

I take a step away, hoping he’ll follow. “Remember what you said to me? Can you climb? I need you to climb right now, Christopher. One rung at a time.”

His eyes are as deep and fathomless as the bay was that night. There might have been sharks in that depth. Or it might have been my imagination, running wild. In the end he stands up and runs a hand through his hair. “We didn’t hurt you,” he says like a statement, even though it’s a question.

“I’m fine.” That’s a lie, but there are no bruises on my skin. Nothing he can see.

On the inside I’m hurt in ways I didn’t know were possible.

It’s natural for me to lie, I almost believe the words myself. From the time I was little I had to tell Daddy I was fine or risk losing my mom. I had to lie to Mom or watch her fall apart. Lying is how I keep the world together. It’s how I survive.

Sutton has the door open for us when we walk up. He stands a few feet to the side as we get in, both Christopher and me in the very back. Sutton slides in toward the driver, facing us. A rap on the roof, and then we’re driving through downtown Tanglewood. We start the drive in almost-silence, only the muffled sound of the tires on the road to soothe us.

“How much of that champagne did you drink?” I finally ask.

“Damon Scott has his own bartender,” Christopher says. “Who kept refilling my drink. And I kept drinking it, which is damn stupid of me. I’ve done a lot of stupid things.”

“Okay, Mr. Valedictorian. Clearly you’re a sad drunk. That’s something I didn’t know about you. And now that I know it, you aren’t allowed to have liquor.”

“He’s never held it well,” Sutton murmurs from the other seat.

“Really?” I ask, curious about this lightweight side of Christopher.

Sutton looks at me, his blue eyes dark across the limo. “It’s not something he does often. In fact this is only the second time I’ve seen him get drunk. The first time—that was the night we met.”

“Hell,” Christopher says. Only that.

“We were at the Den,” Sutton says. “He told me about this woman he knew.”

My throat goes tight, because I know which woman he’s talking about. Which means that Christopher was as messed up about me as I was about him. Part of me had suspected that, but it was easier to think of him as an unfeeling robot-monster instead of a flesh-and-blood man.

There’s no jealousy in Sutton’s blue eyes—well, maybe a little. But mostly understanding. He wasn’t clueless when he stepped between us. Definitely not clueless when he bent me over the library counter and spanked my ass with a book.

“What do we do now?” I ask, sounding lost to my own ears.

It’s Christopher who answers, his voice bleak. “What we’ve always done. We work. We fix what’s broken. We fight for every goddamn penny.”

“Your choice,” Sutton says, softer. “It’s always been your choice what you do here. Whether you go or stay. And which one of us you bring home.”

I swallow hard, because I already know what I’m going to do. For tonight, at least. Christopher has been a rock of ambition the entire time I’ve known him. Whatever the reason, tonight broke him. I’m not going to leave him alone to face this himself.

The limo pulls up to a high-rise condo. I know from the sleek glass and the stiff bellhop who lives here, even before Christopher pushes out of the seat. Where does Sutton live? Maybe not somewhere as rustic as a ranch, but I know he must be able to open a window. Must be able to feel the sun and the wind on his face.

Christopher walks away from the limo without a backward glance. He doesn’t expect me to follow. Maybe he never wants to see me again.

He didn’t shiver alone in my cabin after pulling me out of the bay.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice low in the back of the limo.

Sutton’s blue eyes flash. “You’re going with him.”

Part of me wants to reassure him—*I’m not going to sleep with Christopher. I’m only going to make sure he drinks a glass of water and falls asleep in a bed.* But I don’t owe that promise to Sutton. And I can’t be one hundred percent sure I’ll keep it.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say instead, four words that mean four thousand things. They mean there’s something between us, Sutton and me. Something deep and sensual and ancient. They mean I’m loyal to him, as much as I can be, but the debt I owe Christopher is even older than that.

Sutton’s grip tightens on the leather enough that it creaks under his hold. He’s a mythical beast, barely held by social constraints. “Let me take you to L’Etoile. Or back to my place. Hell, I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

Except being with Christopher is where I need to go tonight.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” I say again, softer now. This time the words mean something different. *I’m sorry.* That’s what they say.

Sutton accepts my apology in cold silence. He steps out of the limo to help me stand, offering his hand when my ankle wobbles on the pavement. Even in anger he won’t let me fall.

I’VE CONTEMPLATED WHERE Christopher Bardot lives more times than I care to admit. The depths of hell, I would have said once. Looking at the sterile high-rise condominium with its glass surfaces and its black leather, I think I had it right.

In the fridge I find old take-out containers and a bottle of champagne, unopened, that someone must have given him. It takes some searching to find a drawer with some medicine. I pour him a glass of tap water and hand him two Advils. “Take this.”

He swallows it without looking at it close or thinking too hard about it. This Christopher is a stranger, one who does what I ask and apologizes for being a bastard. “Thanks.”

And says thank you, apparently.

I study his dark eyes, wondering if he fell over the side of the balcony when I wasn’t looking and hit his head. “Are you sure you’re okay? Sutton didn’t knock something loose in the fight?”

He laughs, a little distant. “Deserved it, if he did.”

A curved leather couch takes up most of the living space. Christopher stumbles over to it and lies down, and I realize then that I probably won’t have much luck moving him. So I follow him over and sit down by his head, moving a lock of dark hair out of his eyes.

“You scared me,” I say, soft and serious.

He looks up at me. “Same.”

That shakes a silent laugh out of me. “Okay, but I wasn’t the one acting crazy.”

“No, you were the one holding his hand. The whole damn play, that’s all I could see. There could have been an explosion on that stage, and I wouldn’t have noticed.”

My cheeks feel hot. “That’s a shame, because it was an amazing play. About love and betrayal and redemption. About doing what’s right, and all the ways we pay for it.”

“That’s what I saw, too.”

He’s talking about Sutton holding my hand. Is that the love or the betrayal? Maybe it’s the redemption, being saved from the terrible pattern we were in.

“I didn’t come to your condo to have sex with you.”

He smiles a little, his eyes closed. “Didn’t think so. You restrained yourself plenty of other times when I didn’t smell like liquor and hadn’t just ruined your nice business deal.”

“You couldn’t hear that from the back.”

“No, but I saw the way Sutton looked. What did you have to promise them?”

“Some book restorations. Saving the carving behind the library. It doesn’t matter now. She looked pretty pissed about the fight.”

“We’ll push the deal through.”

“How?” I ask, almost soundless.

He hears me anyway. “I don’t know.”

“If you’re fighting the rich old ladies of the historical society, who’s going to buy the designer purses and overpriced shoes when your mall opens?”

He doesn’t answer, and I realize he’s fallen asleep. A lightweight, my Christopher. Or maybe he just drank his weight in vodka in that box.

The linen closet looks downright pathetic with only a spare sheet and a mismatched blanket. I take them both because I’m already shivering in the condo. The thermostat looks like it would require an airplane pilot to navigate, so I cover Christopher with both of them.

He snores. Not very loud, but enough that I notice. A rumble in his chest. That’s an intimate piece of knowledge I never had before, not even when we shared a bed that first night. I was too out of it after my dip in the bay to wake up. Or maybe I heard him and just didn’t remember.

It’s possible that I snore, that he heard me do it that night.

This was his fall into the ocean. Not a literal tumble with a splash in the salt water, but a fall nonetheless. The lowest I’ve ever seen him. How could I not help him back up?

Part of me wants to search his cabinets and drawers to ferret out his secrets. The other part of me realizes that there wouldn't be any lying around. He's a man who holds it all behind those dark eyes, locked behind a thousand doors, each as opaque as the next. What would it be like to get behind them? Maybe I'm only now resigned to the idea that I won't ever know.

His bed is just as modern and impersonal as the rest of the condo, a low-slung floating platform that feels like a boat adrift on the ocean. That's where I curl up beneath a heavy down comforter. The pillow smells like him, something ineffable I recognize even if I can't name it, and I drift asleep to the comfort of it.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HOLLOW VICTORY

THE SHINE OF the boardroom table reminds me of the flat white of canvas. It's a place with promise, where something can be made that wasn't before. Money, usually.

The first time I was here I was too busy being pissed at Christopher to appreciate the room. In the half hour that Sutton makes me wait for him, I have the time to study the cherrywood table that matches the walls. Made from the same trees, I think. I have the sudden sense that they were built by hand—by Sutton's hand. That he sawed and sanded these boards. Put whatever this glossy stuff is on top so a sheet of paper can fly all the way across, no friction, all inertia.

There's a kind of romance to that idea, that he would have carved this boardroom himself.

He's angry at me, something I would know even if he hadn't given me the message through the receptionist that he would be handling an important phone call before joining me. Even if he didn't enter the room with his blue eyes flashing and his body vibrating with tension.

I would know he's angry because of the way I left him. The way I chose Christopher. At least that's how it would have seemed to him, and maybe that's how it is.

He drops something on the table, and just like that, it glides a little. Magic. "Our construction permit which has been on hold for two weeks, finally got reviewed. And denied."

Of course it did. We pissed off some of the most important people in the city last night, as well as each other. So much for diplomacy. "Did you by any chance make this table yourself?"

A frown. "Safety concerns, at least that's the claim. I figure if we address them, they'll just come back with something else. The reasoning is

just a technicality.”

“Because I have to wonder, if you *did* make the table, then you must have made the walls. And who does that? Making walls with their bare hands?”

“We had the construction crew on hold while we tried to push through the review, and now we’re going to have to tell them to wait longer. Indefinitely, maybe. Are you going to actually discuss this with me or just talk about the damned walls?”

“The transportation of walls has become something of a personal interest.”

He wants to say something about the construction crew that will no doubt be important, but he looks over at the wall and blinks. “You move walls the same way, whether you make them yourself or not. With a truck.”

And that wraps up Sutton in a single sentence. *With a truck.* Something idealistic enough in him to want an office built by his own hand. And something practical enough not to wonder how it will be done. The grin on my face, I couldn’t stop it for anything. “You’re amazing.”

He studies me. “Did you and Christopher keep drinking all night?”

“Slept like a baby, even though his mattress is hard.”

As soon as I say the words, Sutton’s blue eyes turn to frost. I wish I could take the words back, or explain that we didn’t do anything, that Christopher wasn’t in bed with me. Except that there’s voices coming from the reception area. And then Christopher stands between us.

“Good morning,” he says, his gaze detached and his suit impeccable.

He was gone when I woke up this morning, leaving me in his apartment. There was a cup of lukewarm coffee on the counter made with sugar and extra cream, exactly the way I drink it, which was the only sign that he knew I was even there. I ordered an Uber to L’Etoile, where it took a very long shower to feel human again.

Somehow Christopher went from melancholy drunk to determined in the space of a few hours. It’s like there’s a magnet between him and this focused businessman. No matter how far away he slides, he can snap back in a second. He drops a finger on the permit and draws it toward him, reading without expression.

Sutton strolls over to the far corner, where he runs a hand over a knot, his touch familiar and almost caressing on the wood. He would touch

cherished skin that way. “We’ll need to appeal,” he says.

“Yes,” Christopher says, pushing away the paper, letting it slide. “It won’t work, of course. And we don’t have much time if we want to stay on schedule.”

“Seems unlikely,” Sutton says, but he adds, “There are a lot of men counting on that income. Would be good to come through for them.”

“There’s a domino effect with getting construction and our contracts with retailers.”

“And we would be in a stronger bargaining position when the construction crew inevitably tells me it’ll take longer. Hard to make the point we’re in a hurry if we’re slow as mud.”

Christopher nods. “So we’re agreed.”

I’m not sure what they’ve agreed to, except that having their construction permit denied is a bad thing for many reasons. I could have told them that. Then they look at me, and I realize that I’m going to play some part in getting this resolved. That’s only fair considering it’s the reason why I’m here, but I’m going to need more than clipped words.

“Mrs. Rosemont was *really* mad, you guys.”

Christopher gives me a half smile. “I’ll go to city hall. I have a few contacts there I’ve been working. A few angles that might help this go through.”

“Bribes?” Sutton asks.

“It looks like we’ll need them. Which means we don’t have money for those thousands of book restorations and moving the damned wall. Corruption doesn’t come cheap.”

“Wait.” But I’ve already lost control of the situation. I lost it last night when the first punch was thrown. Or maybe I was foolish to think I could control men like this.

This was also supposed to be the ticket to my mother getting the experimental treatment. That money will go to rich men instead, making them richer. Which strikes me as completely ordinary, all of a sudden. That’s how things have always worked in our lives.

Christopher looks at me, seeing right through all my worry. His eyes soften a fraction. “You did the work we asked you to, better than I could have predicted. I’m the one who fucked things up. Your mother isn’t going to have to pay for that. We’ll pay for the butterfly garden.”

He’s probably right, being a bastion of ethics and correctness. It still feels like a hollow victory. I don’t want to take money they need for construction. The only thing I ever wanted was to spend the money I already had. I never should have agreed to stay here.

Christopher’s forehead furrows. He doesn’t say anything, though. Nothing to reassure me. And he certainly doesn’t offer to let me use the trust fund.

“I’ll call Victor and the construction guys,” Sutton says. “Try to work out some kind of contract negotiations so they don’t walk away and start another job.”

Christopher nods and leaves without a backward glance. I watch the back of his head as he goes, those broad shoulders, the determined way he leaves, like a man going to war.

Sutton doesn’t look at me either as he sets up a meeting time on his phone.

For two men who couldn’t pay enough attention to me last night, they sure are avoiding me in the morning. It doesn’t do nice things for a girl’s self-esteem.

“Our fault,” Sutton says, sensing my guilt.

They fought over me. Does that make it their fault? Or mine? We were so close to having the society’s approval. “The table is beautiful,” I tell him, touching the smooth edge of it with my forefinger.

His blue gaze follows my touch. “Yes.”

It’s not beautiful like Medusa with her blue-green lips and serpent hair. She tried so damn hard to be understood. Wanted that more than anything, but the men she spoke to kept turning to stone.

The table is different. It doesn’t need to say anything. It just *is*. Like the earth and the sun and all the vibrant things in between.

“I just keep thinking… why didn’t I see this when I came here the first time? How beautiful the table is and that you must have made it yourself.”

“You didn’t know me then.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BATTLE STRATEGY

THE FOUNDER OF L’Etoile was a woman who called herself French royalty, but rumor is that she ran a brothel in Paris. Maybe both of those stories are true.

It makes me wonder if every old building has some dark sexual secrets, irreverent to the beauty of the place. Maybe there was a deviant sex club that met in the library after hours. I could look through those shelves for months, for years, and not uncover every secret the building holds.

I won’t be here long enough to find out.

Christopher managed to push through the permits with bribes and threats and who knows what else. The books are going to be dragged to the landfill, the carved wall torn down like plaster.

I’ll be on a plane out of Tanglewood before it happens, because I can’t stand to watch that kind of beauty destroyed. Not like I’m doing them any good here anyway. I may as well go back home, where I can at least make sure Mom is eating proper food instead of whatever berries-and-twigs diet her herbalist has come up with.

Maybe it will be as useful as the experimental treatment I didn’t get her into.

A knock comes at the door while I’m packing. So they got my awkward little resignation text, the kind you send when you were never really working for someone in the first place. It’s tempting to pretend I’m not in the room, but I’m a grown-up, damn it.

Besides, a perverse part of me wants to say goodbye. Even without knowing whether it’s Sutton or Christopher—I want to see whoever’s on the other side of the door one last time.

I open the door, and Sutton stands there looking like sunshine, vibrant and so bright it’s hard to face him. A half inch of scruff from a long day of

work, some of it spent in the sun. Hercules in the flesh, powerful and unreachable and just a little bit mortal.

“Did you come to say goodbye?”

He prowls into the room. That’s his answer, but I already know he didn’t come to say goodbye. This isn’t the kind of man to break my heart and make it easy to leave. Is that what I find so appealing about him? Or maybe it’s the way his muscled body looks in a suit. Hard to say. There’s a lot to love about Sutton Mayfair, for some other woman. Some woman who doesn’t have a plane to catch tomorrow, even if it makes my stomach drop to think about.

His blue gaze lands on my suitcase and then moves away. An obstacle, to a man who must take pleasure in tearing them down. It’s strange that I’m hoping he succeeds even while I steel myself to fight him. That’s the kind of perversity that comes from having parents that loved and hated each other. From being the rope they tugged back and forth for almost two decades, leaving me frayed at both edges.

I might hate the way Christopher pushes me away, but at least I’m used to it.

“How’s your mother?” Sutton asks, throwing me off guard.

That’s probably on purpose. Some kind of battle strategy. Make her think you care about her. Then do something terrible. “I talked to her this morning. She tried to make a kale smoothie but forgot to put the lid on the blender, so it sprayed everywhere.”

His gaze meets mine, so direct and clear it steals my breath. “I thought that might be why you’re leaving. If she weren’t feeling well.”

“She’s doing great,” I say lightly. “Kale is a cancer killer.”

He watches me without a change in expression.

“That’s what her herbalist says.” And suddenly it’s too personal to talk about, vegetables and remission and the sinking fear that I’m going to lose her, too. That’s when I’ll be all alone. When you’re forever held taut from both ends, the most scary thing is to be let go.

Steady blue eyes seem to know that. “There’s unfinished business between us, Harper. It’s not over because you sent a text message.”

He doesn’t ask me to stay. Maybe he knows that would make me run faster.

“I’m sorry if you thought…” I have to clear my throat, pretending to be stern and unfeeling. I’m playing a part right now. The part of Christopher. “If you thought there was something between us. It was just a little fun. A little…kissing.”

My denim shorts might as well be made of flimsy lace, my black tank top completely see-through. That’s how it feels when he looks down my body at the places he touched. At the places he kissed—especially between my legs.

His gaze lingers there, and I turn liquid. It’s a travesty to call what he did to me *kissing.* He turned me inside out. Made me feel golden and silky and hot. There’s alchemy in his fingers and his tongue. He turned me into a river of precious metal.

That was before I sent him a text that said, *Thanks for the memories, but I think it’s best for all of us if we part now. PS. I’m keeping the library book.*

He settles on the edge of the high, lace-trimmed bed. It should be incongruous, a rough man against something so delicate. It should be ridiculous, instead of like he belongs there. “Do you know, I thought you were in love with Christopher? When I first met you?”

My throat is suddenly dry. We can invest money and destroy buildings. We can change the landscape of a city, but God, not talk about our feelings. That isn’t how it’s done.

Sutton doesn’t care how things are done.

“You could have asked,” I manage to say, my voice only a little shaky. “I would have set you straight. There’s nothing between us.”

He laughs, the white of his teeth bright in the quiet shadows. Only a small lamp on the nightstand lights the room, and it can’t compete with Sutton. “There’s something between you. But it’s the same way you couldn’t see the table and the walls. You didn’t know me then.”

And he knows me now.

I’m afraid to ask. It’s really better if I don’t know the answer, if I only wonder and worry forever, but whenever there’s trouble, I have a way of falling into it. “So what’s between us?”

“Oh, lots of things. Probably love is one of them. Hate, too. Those things go together more than they should. But damn, there’s a boatload of chemistry between you two.”

There’s chemistry here, crackling in the air between Sutton and me.

“We’ve never—”

“Of course not. Anyone can see that. Christopher wouldn’t be walking around trying to tear apart the world with his bare hands if you had. Only a certain amount of denial feels good. The rest just fucking hurts.”

I lick my lips, and his gaze tracks my tongue. “Which one was the hallway?”

Only then do I realize I’ve been walking toward him, walking closer without realizing it. Almost two feet away right now. He’s a burning sun, and I’ve been cold for so long.

“It hurt,” he says, soft and almost dangerous, “reading the text.”

He isn’t diminished by telling the truth. That’s a trick I’d like him to teach me. It doesn’t make him seem weak, that he’s been hurt. Not with his shoulders this broad and his hands this scarred.

It makes me seem powerful, instead.

Powerful enough that I can reach out and touch him—the backs of my fingers against the scruff of his cheek. Soft when I stroke down. Prickly when I push back up. There’s terrain to be explored, to be tested against the will of my body.

My voice comes out a whisper. “I think you did come to say goodbye.”

Not with words.

His eyes tell me no, that he’s not giving up on this, but his body leans into me. That’s something you don’t think about, that the sun doesn’t just burn. It wants to warm you. I let my hand fall to the angle of his jaw, to the place where his shirt opens and reveals bronze skin.

I close my eyes, letting myself feel the joy that threatened when I heard the knock. If I’m honest with myself, there had been joy when I sent the text—thinking he would come for me. Hoping he would. If I could believe in love and trust and sex, if I thought any of it could last, I would have done more than hope. I’ve seen where it leads, and I don’t want to do that to him.

Maybe we can have one night.

You don’t face a lifetime of humiliation and hurt after one night, do you?

His eyelids are heavy now, because he knows what happens next. Some part of him came here to do this with me, because it might be the last chance. It could be the last time I see him, which makes my chest hollow out. That’s the empty space where promises could go.

He hooks two fingers in the waistband of my shorts, bringing me flush against his body. My stomach sucks in and then out, in and out, in and out, sensitive skin brushing bare knuckles. “Are you nervous?” he asks, his voice calm and deep.

It makes me laugh, how un-nervous he seems. I’m made up only of nerves, strung together with dreams and desire and a penchant for trouble. “We’re going to do it in a bed, after all.”

A small laugh. “To spice things up,” he says, echoing me.

The words seem less like a joke now. More prophetic. The library counter had been spontaneous and wild. This is different, almost unbearably intimate.

This close I can see the pale striations set into his blue eyes. I could dabble in a thousand shades of blue and never capture them on canvas.

With a sharp pang, I know that I’ll keep trying anyway.

It will be my new life’s work, this sky.

I don’t see him move. We’re too close for that; I feel him shift against me. Then his hand cups the back of my neck. His lips meet mine. I suck in a breath, drawing the scent of him into my body. He uses the moment to part my lips. There is no coaxing, no preamble. His lips bite over mine, telling me exactly how our bodies will move. His tongue presses inside, insistent. *Gentle,* his mouth tells me. *I’m going to be gentle with you.* His hand tips my head back, making it easier for him to reach, keeping me from going anywhere. Gentle and implacable.

It’s like we never stopped that night in the hallway. This is what could have happened after, his tongue still salted from my body. His hand cupping my breast, his thumb and forefinger finding my nipple. A squeeze, enough to make me gasp. And harder, to whimper.

“I want you naked,” he murmurs against my lips.

He’s already had me with my skirts around my waist, leaning back against wallpaper. And he’s had me bent over a library counter. It’s more revealing to let him draw the black tank top over my head. There’s nothing underneath. No bra. Only my skin, flushed with arousal. My nipples hard and ruched from the way he touches me. I jump when those calluses brush the smooth curve underneath. It doesn’t stop him. He does it again, to see the way I move.

“I—I want—” I don’t know what I want, only that it hurts. Is this the good hurt he was talking about? It’s not exactly pain. It’s more like I’m going crazy.

“I’ll give it to you.” He bends his head to my breast, using his palm at my lower back to pull me toward him. His lips on my breast make me jerk—not away. I move closer. And then his lips close on my nipple, wet and hot and somehow bright. A cry comes out of me, a high pitch, a keen that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It sounds like grief, but it feels like heaven. He runs his teeth against my sensitive skin, and I gasp.

What a terrible deception. That he would give me what I wanted, but it only makes me want more. Is this how he feels about money, about power, always needing more?

A knock at the door makes me jump out of his hold.

He lets me. That’s the only way I could have gotten free of those hands that have held wood larger than my body. His eyes narrow on mine, not even glancing at the door. “Tell me you have room service coming.”

I shake my head. “It could be Bea.”

Except she would have called before coming down. Or invited me up, if she knew I was planning on leaving Tanglewood in utter despair, for her to comfort with wine and a fancy cheese plate. Hugo really does make the best cheese plates.

“Stay here,” he says, curt, like maybe it’s his hotel room instead of mine.

“I can answer the door,” I say, except there’s a cool breeze on my breasts. I’m not wearing a shirt, which is probably a good reason not to greet visitors right now. The black tank top somehow disappeared, so I grab a pillow and hug it to my body, facing the door.

Sutton opens the door and faces the newcomer with no surprise.

From the angle I can’t see who it is, but I know based on the low, angry voices that come next. From the cadence of the voice and the rumble of sound. From the excitement in my chest.

“Let him in,” I say, because I don’t want another fight.

Or maybe that’s exactly what I want.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

COMPETITION

CHRISTOPHER'S DARK GAZE finds my bare shoulders. He makes a sound like a hiss. I could have touched burning-hot iron to his skin to produce that sound. I want him to see what he gave up those years ago.

Not enough to drop the pillow.

Sutton closes the door and leans against it, apparently content to obey me. Even if I said the wrong command. Maybe that's what he's doing, teaching me a lesson.

"Is this what gets you off?" Christopher demands, looking every inch the powerful businessman. This is how he'd be across the smooth cherry table in the boardroom, negotiating a contract, establishing terms. "You want two men panting after your pretty little body?"

It feels like the answer should be no, but the little flip in my stomach means maybe yes. Is that wrong of me? My desires aren't anything straightforward and numerical. I could paint them, these feelings. They would look like Cleopatra, but she wouldn't be seductive and knowing. She would be afraid. *I'm over my head with these men.*

Christopher prowls toward me, and I clutch the pillow tighter as I evade him. It means giving him a glimpse of my bare back, but it's better than being cornered. He keeps coming at me. I keep stepping back, until I hit something warm and breathing and unmovable.

Sutton.

I'm between both men, caught with only a pillow to cover me. Christopher's eyes are completely merciless. He doesn't feel sorry for anything that happens next. When I glance over my shoulder, Sutton looks a little kinder. Enough that he runs a gentle hand along my side, soothing, settling me for whatever comes next.

“What are you doing?” I ask, but it’s not a direct question. Not only for Christopher or for Sutton. It’s for both of them. For the room, which has closed me in.

“Nothing you don’t want,” Sutton murmurs in my ear. When he speaks like that, it’s easy to see why someone would do business with them. They’d stake their entire livelihood on a handshake with this man, his word worth more than a thousand other signatures.

And still my vision wavers, the whole world wavy and ocean-like. Underwater, that’s what I am.

“Drop the pillow,” Christopher says, and he sounds the very opposite as Sutton. The opposite of reassuring. He’s pure danger like this. “Let’s see what we’re paying for tonight.”

A slap on the face couldn’t have surprised me more. I step back into Sutton’s embrace, holding the pillow tighter. “I’m not a prostitute.”

He gives me a cold smile. “I’m not going to leave cash on the dresser, Harper. For many reasons, not the least of which is that you don’t need the money.”

If he had coaxed me for hours, I would have held on to the pillow. This Christopher, I know very well. This Christopher I know how to fight. I toss the pillow aside, casually, as if I’m naked in front of two men every day. “I wouldn’t be a prostitute, even without my trust fund.”

Christopher’s gaze doesn’t drop. He stares into my eyes hard, like he’s saying a thousand things without words. There are probably equations and pie charts in his head. “But I’m still going to end up paying for this.”

“What does that mean?” I ask, even though I know. I’ll pay my own price.

Sutton strokes his hand down the side of my neck. His mouth follows the same path. No wonder he was able to tame a wild horse. I would have followed him to the stream. Would have crossed the county to keep his hands on me. “You tell me to stop,” he says softly. “Tell me to punch Christopher in the face. Whatever you say, that’s what happens.”

Heady, that’s the feeling of power. Addictive. Terrifying. “What if I’m wrong?”

“There’s no wrong,” Sutton says.

Christopher’s lips twist. “If there’s no wrong, then there’s no right.”

I could kill him, this man who was my stepbrother and my former confidant. This man who controls my fortune. Yes, I could strangle him easily and feel relief.

But not before I lose my virginity to him.

“I’m surprised you would share.” I could be speaking to either of them, but it’s Sutton who could have demanded we never answer the door.

Sutton who could have insisted Christopher go away.

His lips move against my neck, an enticement all their own. My skin tightens beneath him. “Do you remember what I told you the first day? In the boardroom? I don’t mind that you have unfinished business.”

Make him suffer all you want, as long as you don’t go home with him at the end of the night. That’s what he said about the gala. Is that what he thinks about tonight? Except I won’t be going home with either of them. “Unfinished business,” I say, unsteady. “Is that what we’re calling this?”

Christopher’s eyes flash. “How generous of my business partner.”

Words fall like pebbles into a large lake, almost soundless. Deceptively small. “That’s what I did with the library, isn’t it?” Sutton’s voice is low and faintly mocking. “You wanted it but didn’t have enough. I helped you do it.”

“Helped.” Christopher tastes the word, sounding hard and accusatory. He looks at the places where Sutton touches me—one hand on my arm, his other on my waist. His mouth less than an inch from my neck. I can feel the soft caress of his breath. “This is how you help.”

“Do you want her?” Sutton says, sounding unconcerned. The way you would ask if someone is having a nice day, polite indifference—you could almost think he doesn’t care. If not for the erection hard and throbbing against my ass.

“I’ve always wanted her.”

The words should be sweet. Maybe for another woman they would be, but they only make me angry. They make me furious. Not the snake-hair kind of fury. This is sly and seductive. It ripples along my skin, turning me into someone else.

Someone who turns her face back to meet Sutton’s lips.

I start the kiss, but Sutton is the one who takes it deep. It’s not a show, the way he licks inside my lips like he’s trying to taste my essence. He must find it, because he groans into my mouth—soft, like maybe he doesn’t want

to make that sound. I bite him for it, because my body is wild and feral and wants him to make the sound again.

Only a small part of my mind listens. Any second now the hotel door will open and close. Christopher will leave. For so many reasons he'll leave. Even putting aside the fact that he never touched me after that night in the art gallery, even ignoring the tense competition between the two men… threesomes aren't something men do, are they?

Frat boys talk about it at school. Two women, that's what they want. Bonus points if they're twins. But never two men, not for ones as confident and commanding as these. They would kill each other, which maybe is the point. This is a gladiator match, and I'm the arena.

The door doesn't open and close.

A whisper on the back of my hand. On my cheek. It could almost be nothing, except that my skin remembers. I break the kiss to see Christopher tracing my skin, not touching. There's an expression of fierce concentration on his face. This man can discuss advanced economic theory like it's the alphabet, and he studies my shoulders, my breasts, the indent of my waist, like I'm a puzzle beyond comprehension.

Those eyes have never been more opaque than now. It's impossible to imagine what he's thinking behind black marble. Is he surprised that we ended up here, after hating each other for so long? Or does it feel inevitable, like every sharp word and growled insult has led to this?

That's what it feels like for me—inevitable. It's finding silt at the bottom of the ocean after a long way down. I knew it must be here, but I lost hope along the way.

He brushes the backs of his fingers against my collarbone. Lower, lower. Skips over my breasts and touches again at my stomach, making me suck in a breath.

He's going to make me ask, this man. He's going to make me beg.

"Touch me," I whisper.

His eyes meet mine. It's with cold deliberation that he cups my breast. Tugs my nipple between thumb and forefinger. He doesn't blink, not even when I ache and squirm in Sutton's hold.

It's wrong that I'm held from behind by one man and touched by another. It's the culmination of everything we've done, a physical

manifestation of being with Sutton at the theater and having Christopher watch me from his box seat.

Everything more intense and surreal.

“Beautiful, aren’t they?” Sutton’s voice startles me. He sounds casual, as if they share women every day. As if my breasts are a sunset worth mentioning.

Christopher swallows hard. “Beautiful. I’ve dreamed about them, of course.”

“I think a man would have to be dead not to dream about these.” Sutton runs a hand up my side and cups my breast, the one Christopher isn’t already holding. There are two different hands on me right now. One calloused and square-tipped. The other elegant and strong. It’s pure decadence having both of them touch me. Enough to drive a girl insane, the way they each feel so different, with every stroke telling me, *there are two of us, two men, two.*

My hips rock forward and back, reaching toward Christopher and then back toward Sutton. I can’t decide what I want, can’t decide *who* I want, and it hurts both ways.

They guide me toward the bed without discussing it. They became business partners for a reason. Even so different, there’s some part of them that works together. I’m undressed with four hands moving over me, worshipping me, driving me insane.

I’m laid down on the white lace bedspread, my breasts ruched and sensitive, my legs spread by Christopher’s hips. He touches me, careful and sure, finding me wet. One finger presses inside. Two. My body pushes up to meet him, finding the rhythm he feeds me, seeking release.

He pulls away before I can reach climax, making me moan my complaint.

“You want this?” he asks, so soft it might not be important. If not for the way his jaw ticks, for the impossible bulge beneath his slacks, you could think my answer doesn’t matter.

It was always supposed to be you. I bite those words back, because they have no place in this moment. No place in front of Sutton, who leans against the dresser, looking hungry and benevolent. He’s the one granting us this moment. Is this a gift to me or Christopher?

It might not be a gift at all. A Trojan horse, the way Christopher unbuckles his belt with hands made clumsy with urgency, the way my legs fall open against the bed. Enough to destroy the both of us, the way Christopher catches a condom Sutton tosses across three feet.

And then Christopher pushes against me.

His eyes widen. “You’ve done this before. Haven’t you?”

I turn my face away, hiding. A little ashamed. The hand on my cheek is gentle but inexorable. He turns me to face him, his eyes made a fraction lighter.

“Haven’t you?” he asks, soft, even though he must already know. My cheeks are burning. In all the imagined times that Christopher Bardot took my virginity, I never had to tell him.

Never had to admit I’ve waited for him.

“I want this,” I whisper, pulling uselessly at his arms where he leans over me. It might as well be pulling stone columns for all I move him. He’ll make the decision for us.

He leans down to press a chaste kiss to my lips. It feels like goodbye, that kiss, and I push up from the bed, following him, *begging* him with my body to stay.

I didn’t need to worry. He pushes inside me fast enough that I gasp, hard enough that I arch away from him, stunned and stretched. My hands fist in the bedspread.

“Shhh,” Christopher says, brushing hair away from my cheek. “The worst of it’s over. I’m going to be gentle with you, Harper. I promise.”

It’s a promise that makes my eyes sting, because it can’t be real. He’s determined and hard and cold, but never gentle with me. Except he pulls me into his arms, cradling me, holding me still as he pulls back and thrusts again. My mouth opens in lingering pain, but he captures it in a kiss. It has to be a lie, this kiss, so full of emotion that Christopher can’t have.

Pleasure surrounds me as surely as the dark water around a stone.

I sink deeper with every thrust and every breath. His head falls to my shoulder as he murmurs, “Yes, God. Harper. Like that. You’re so beautiful like that.”

Beautiful. He uses the word, but it doesn’t feel like he’s describing me. Not the way I look, anyway. He’s describing the way I feel around him. The way my secret muscles clench and squeeze, fighting the intrusion. He

reaches down to move my hips in some specific way that feels only slightly different, until he pushes in again. Then sparks light up a place deep in my body, electricity running to every nerve and making me light up.

A rough sound comes from behind me, and I look back to see Sutton watching us with eyes a sharp crystal blue. They speak of arousal, those eyes, and something else—a secret plan.

A plan, like this is part of his strategy.

Like he always knew it would come to this between the three of us.

Then Christopher thrusts into me again, and I forget to think about Sutton. I forget anything but the feel of this body working over me, inside me, the warm lips on my neck. He tastes my skin along my shoulder. My breast. When he closes over my nipple, I whimper.

"I need you." Three words. The most truth I've ever spoken to Christopher.

His eyes reflect the need back at me. *I need you.* Or maybe I'm imagining that. And then he closes his eyes, blocking me out again. He thrusts again, hard, making those starbursts behind my eyelids. There's nothing to do but pant and moan and feel when he does that.

I'm drifting in a nighttime ocean of pleasure, unable to find land but not wanting, never wanting it as long as he does this. My nails scratch at lean, muscled shoulders. He grunts and pushes harder, harder. He bends to my ear, the other side of Sutton. And murmurs, so quiet I almost think I'm imagining it. "Please," he says against my skin, more feeling than sound.

This man, so proud and so strong. He says *please* like a man kneeling at my feet.

And I come like a goddess being worshipped, the pleasure fire-bright in my clit and spreading out to my body in waves. Christopher rides my climax with quick thrusts that take me deeper. There's no air here, but I don't need it, don't need to breathe, only need Christopher—and I cling to him. I grasp at him, hungry, desperate, as his body stiffens and pushes, once, twice, and he cries out, hoarse and broken.

Exhaustion makes me collapse back on the bed, my eyes closed. Sleep laps at my skin, threatening to drag me under. God, I can't fall asleep right now. I shouldn't, but my body doesn't understand that. The last thing I feel is Christopher's lips against my forehead, like a benediction as I sink into sleep.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ANIMAL PRIDE

WHEN I WAKE up, it's still dark in the room, no beam of light from between the two heavy drapes. There's a warm body underneath me, muscles waiting. My hand clenches in springy hair on a broad chest. Before I look up, I know it's Sutton. A slice through my chest, realizing that we're alone in the room. Sometime after taking my virginity, sometime after kissing my hair, he walked away. That's what he always does. He probably has some academic reasoning in his head about how it's actually protecting me, walking away, instead of breaking my heart again.

"Morning," he says softly.

"Christopher?"

"He left. Are you feeling okay?" He means the virginity thing, which I want to brush off as nothing. Not a big deal. Only a social construct, except it feels distinctly physical right now. There's a dull ache between my legs, a reminder of where Christopher has been.

Beneath a white sheet I can see that Sutton's hard. "I'm fine. What about you?"

A flash of teeth as he smiles. "Don't worry about me."

I'm worried about the way Christopher interrupted us in the hallway. About the way he interrupted us last night. We must have reached the part where it hurts him.

My palm brushes over the muscled ridges and flat plane, down to where his arousal burns against my hand. He sucks in a breath when I grasp him with my fist. This part I've done before, playing in the basements of boys I could barely remember after the fact. They weren't as big as Sutton Mayfair. Not nearly as controlled either. He lets me stroke him, down and down, the rest of his body still like a predator coiled to strike.

"You're sore," he says, his voice like rocks grating against each other.

“Not,” I say, which is a lie. It doesn’t matter, this ache between my thighs. I want to feel Sutton; maybe more than that, I want him to feel me.

He looks like he’s about to argue the point, and God, he could prove it. If he touched me between my legs, I would probably flinch. So I press my lips against his chest, to the side, lips open and teeth grazing him. His body jerks, no longer controlled.

“Damn,” he mutters.

“It’s just the two of us,” I whisper.

It’s just the two of us, which means we can finally get this right. Now, when I’m still fragile and sore from Christopher, it might finally be enough to free me from wanting him. If only I could want another man. If only I could want Christopher and have him, that would be enough.

He holds himself back, but only barely. Those muscles that look handsome beneath his suit have turned into something far more feral. He’s part animal now, vibrating with need. “Shouldn’t touch you like this. Should give you a break.”

The memory of those blue eyes watching Christopher comes back to me. He was trying to prove something letting him be the first, but I don’t know what. That he might be first, but Sutton would be last? I don’t know what he’s playing, but there’s far too much thinking in it.

So I let my thumb brush over the tip of Sutton’s cock, smoothing precome over the blunt satin of him, feel the shake of his body—and the moment when he breaks.

Firm hands grasp my body and turn me over, facing down. I pushed him toward this, but it’s still a surprise to feel him arrange me, knees beneath my body, a pillow supporting me. He pushes inside me without preamble, and I’m glad I can hide my soft cry of pain in the mattress.

“Harper,” he says, his voice rough-edged with desire.

“I’m okay,” I manage to gasp, because I’m stretched and aching—but I’m telling the truth. I can survive anything to feel Sutton come apart. “Please, Sutton. I want you.”

He groans his surrender, covering my back with his body. “Christ.”

His cock pushes against the walls. He’s thicker than Christopher was, or maybe I’m just that sore now, but either way I wince with the effort to let him in. Until his large hand delves beneath my stomach and between my legs. He finds my clit with rough fingers, his touch knowing and merciless.

He pinches me hard enough to distract me from the stretch. Hard enough that I'm pushing back so he'll give me more.

"You're incredible. Do you know that? You're a goddamn miracle and you walked into my office. How could I not want you? How could I not have you?"

I'm glad I don't have to answer those questions, because I don't know. My lips can't form words when he fucks me hard and fast, letting the desire from last night build, pull us into climax. His body uses mine in a way that feels primal. A sharp pain on my shoulder. He bites down hard, which sends me over the edge. Orgasm clenches my body as he rides toward his own release. In the last minute he pulls out and spills, hot and thick at the small of my back.

My body collapses, slick with sweat and arousal and come.

Sutton strokes a hand down the side of my thigh, a caress that says what words can't. How I've pleased him. How he needed that and I gave it to him. There's animal pride in me, even as I lie in a limp puddle on the lace bedspread.

There's running water and then he's back with a warm washcloth. He cleans my back and then turns me over, tucking me into bed. My eyes are closed when he joins me, curling his body around me as if he can protect me from morning. As if he can keep me when it comes.

His breathing evens out, and I know he's asleep. But no matter how tired I am, I'm not going to fall asleep again. I'm wide awake in his arms, counting down the hours until I'll slip away. It was everything I wanted it to be—sensual and mind blowing. I'm halfway in love with Sutton, lying here, but the sad part is, I'm still in love with Christopher Bardot.

Somehow I've only made it worse.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

A COMPLICATED MAN

WHEN I WAS little we had a series of condos in Beverly Hills, because Mom wouldn't consider living anywhere else in LA. Maybe it's because I grew up with her that I could never condemn the rich. It was taught to her the way other families tell their children to say *please* and *thank you*, the idea that you were defined by the zip code you lived in.

It wasn't only pride. It was life or death.

I understand that survival instinct, because she taught it to me.

There would be some new husband, always. Our refrigerator would suddenly be full again. That's how I knew it was happening. He would pay the bills that were overdue. He would pay out the lease so we could move in with him. All these things were so normal I didn't know there was any other way to find food or shelter.

Maybe art saved me, because talent is the great equalizer. There's no way to pay for more of it. No way to trade a roll of cash for the hours spent late into the night, working and tearing your hair out. It was the whisper in my ear that there's something else that mattered.

In the end even art could not defy that survival instinct.

Those paintings supported us after Daddy died. They paid for the two-bedroom condo in Baldwin Hills. There are ceramic picnic tables in the courtyard with mosaics of palm trees etched into them. Our window overlooks the parking lot.

Absolutely no one from our old life would speak to Mom if they knew she lived here. But then, they never spoke to her again after the public humiliation of the will came out. It was as bad as we thought it would be. Worse, because of the memes and public jokes that came after. We were a spectacle for a couple weeks, before another rich person did something crazy.

“You look skinny,” she says, puttering around the small kitchen. Nothing that tastes like food has ever been made there, but we manage to eat well enough on premade bags of salad and delivery from the Korean restaurant down the street. “I’ll make you something to eat.”

“Not hungry,” I tell her, dropping my luggage in the middle of the living room. I left Sutton warm in my hotel room and took the first flight out of the airport, that’s how desperate I was to leave. Then I caught a connection to LAX. “Besides, I should be the one making you something. Tell me you’ve had more than smoothies.”

She comes and sits down by me, holding a glass of green sludge. “I think it’s helping. I haven’t felt this good since the treatment started.”

I peek at her through one eye, but she looks serious. And peaceful.

It’s a little ironic that the will reading was probably the best thing that could have happened to her. She lost everything that mattered to her that day. But once we picked up the pieces, she didn’t have that frantic edge.

And she never again had to sleep with some new husband to fill the fridge.

“I was thinking of starting work at the studio again,” she says, referring to the yoga studio. She started working there maybe a year after the will. She teaches classes or works behind the desk. They basically pay pennies, but it helps her feel in control of her life.

“The doctor said you should rest.”

“Doctors,” she says, waving away cancer like it’s nothing. “I feel fine.”

She doesn’t look fine. There are still shadows under her eyes, but they aren’t as pronounced as before. I can’t look at her and not see the way she looked in that room full of her enemies. That day may not have broken her, but it broke something in me.

Impulsively I reach over and touch her hand. She looks surprised. Then she folds me into her skinny arms, resting my face against her shoulder the way she did when I was little.

“What happened?”

Only two words, but they have the power to make me cry. Maybe because there’s already such knowledge in them. Out of anyone she knows what it’s like to be hurt by a man. I let the tears fall, because love is terrible, terrible, terrible. And it doesn’t go away.

When I can speak again, it isn’t Christopher that I talk about.

“Sutton walks around like nothing can surprise him, like nothing can shake him. He’s so freaking capable, it’s like vibrating in him. It would be just a day’s work to make a business deal and then build a house.”

“I see,” Mom says, in this speculative voice like maybe she *does* see. Maybe her motherly instincts have somehow told her that her daughter had a wicked threesome in a French hotel.

“But I left, and worse than that, I think I let him down. He wanted me to save that library. He never told me that, not with words.” He spanked me with a nonfiction book over the counter, though. “It’s something I felt from him.”

“Wasn’t it his company?” she asks. “He could stop the construction if he wanted.”

There was that story about the horse, though. About Cinnamon. You didn’t throw away a horse because it was wild. You kept it, even when you weren’t sure what to do with it. And then one day someone came along, someone no one expected, to tame her.

That old library lives and breathes as much as any animal. Christopher doesn’t feel that. For all that he genuinely cares about me, he sees the building as a commodity. Real estate.

“I think maybe… finding me was his way of stopping the construction.”

It meant he put his faith in me. There’s a knot in my stomach that says I let him down.

And I let that old library down.

“I didn’t get you into the treatment study.”

“And I didn’t want to do it. I would have, for you, but I didn’t want to.” She would have put herself through the pain of needles and chemicals, because I want her to get better. Does that make me selfish or stupid? Maybe both. Or maybe I’m just a little girl who wants her mother.

“Daddy would have paid for the treatment,” I say, feeling stubborn.

“Yes,” she says, simple and certain. “He would have insisted that I do it, too, even if I didn’t want to. You and he are a lot alike.”

“I don’t know whether that’s a compliment.” On some level I’ve been doing to my mother what Christopher does to me. Using my protection of her as a crutch. She did need me once, the way I needed him to dive in after me and rescue me. But she doesn’t need me to make smoothies or buy butterfly gardens in her name.

“Of course it is. I loved your father.”

“He loved you back.”

“He asked me out, you know. That night at the art gallery. Asked me on a date, like we were young and foolish. I said yes, of course. I could never say no to him.”

My throat burns. No wonder she had thought he wouldn’t leave her out of the will, among many other reasons. And we’ll never get to ask him why he did. Was it a moment of anger toward my mom? Was it a lesson for me? But he didn’t have any answers for me.

“Do you wonder why?” I ask.

“Sometimes. Not much, these days. He was a complicated man. Ambitious. Afraid.”

That makes me look up at her. “Afraid?”

“Afraid that someone was using him for his money. He couldn’t let it go. He never really trusted anyone.” She’s looking into the past now. “He loved me the same way I loved him, without being able to help it. That kind of love, it takes away your control, and he hated that.”

It breaks my heart to think of how different we could have been. If she and Daddy had gone on a date and then another. If they had finally been able to reconcile their love into building a life together. So many possibilities ended the night of that exhibit.

I close my eyes tight. “I think I have to go back.”

It was fear that sent me away from Tanglewood like a scalded cat. But I can’t wait the rest of my life wondering what might have been. Love is outside our control, but we aren’t defined by love. We’re defined by our choices. Our actions. By the willingness to do what’s right even when it’s hard.

I’ve always been hurt that Christopher didn’t fight for us, but how can I walk away without fighting for him? Without fighting for the library? Somehow those two things are the same.

Mom smoothes my hair back. “You always were my warrior. Even in school, with that Medusa painting. Even when it seemed impossible. You never gave up.”

“I gave up this time.” The words are acid in my mouth.

“Nonsense. You came home because you wanted a kale smoothie and a hug. That’s not giving up. That’s taking a break. Everyone needs a break.”

“What if I’m too late?” I’m not thinking of the library crumbling, though I should be. I’m thinking of the look in Sutton’s eyes. I’m thinking of the way he held me like I was something precious, and the way I walked away. He won’t forgive me for that. I don’t blame him.

“Well,” Mom says, her voice half pragmatism, half mystical acceptance of the world and its vagaries. “You might be. But you won’t know unless you try.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

SACRIFICE

My Uber driver is from Egypt, something he tells me only when he sees the library book I'm reading as we leave the airport. Maybe he thinks I'm getting ready for international travel. "Don't use a purse," he says. "Too easy to steal. You want to keep things in your pockets, but deep inside. With buttons or zippers to close them."

"You seem to know a lot about picking pockets."

He waves a hand. "Everyone knows a lot. It's the only way you don't get robbed. There's no place on earth with more thieves than Cairo."

That makes me think of the Thieves Club, the semi-ironic name that four men in Tanglewood gave themselves. Hugo and Sutton. Blue and Christopher. Because every dollar they earn must be taken from somebody else. "Is that why you moved here?"

"It was the killing," he says frankly. "The stealing I could live with."

"That seems reasonable."

"I have two daughters. It was no place for them to grow up."

Fathers. So protective. There's a tightness in my throat I don't want to be there. It's terrible to be angry at someone who isn't alive to defend himself. The older I get, the more sure I am that he knew what would happen at that will reading. Maybe he would have changed it if he and Mom had started dating for a while, but at one point he knew he would humiliate her.

He did it to protect me. He knew I would hate him for it and did it anyway.

"Don't believe anything they tell you," Abdel says. "They will try to sell you a thousand artifacts in the streets and around the pyramids. Mummified cats, but you open them—only birds and rocks and dirt inside."

"Why would I want a mummified cat?"

“Ancient scrolls that are made of plastic. Convincing plastic.”

“Okay, I’d like an ancient scroll. I might have fallen for that one.”

“They charge you so much money, that’s why you believe it’s real. That is the irony. If it was cheap to buy, then you would know.”

Abdel takes me to Walmart, because it’s the only place that sells paint at midnight. He accepts cash for waiting in the parking lot and helping me load the supplies into his trunk.

Then we go to the library.

“This place doesn’t look open,” he says, eyeing the dark corners in all directions. “Or safe. This looks like a place you will experience the stealing.”

“Better that than the killing,” I say, moving the gallons of paint to the curb. There’s a lot to do before morning, and I think construction crews start sooner than art gallery exhibits.

He walks toward the driver’s side door. Sighs. Comes back. “I don’t think I should leave you here. Probably you’ll get stabbed and then they’ll take away my Uber license.”

Clear as day I can hear Christopher’s voice telling me I have a death wish.

Maybe I did, back then. It’s not that I wanted to die, but I didn’t really know how to live. There was always money in the way, always something that had to be fought over. Always a struggle to survive.

“I’ll call a friend,” I say because I’m a long time from sitting on a railing alone.

On my phone there’s a long list of contacts. People from Smith College who always knew where the best parties would be. Artists from New York City. Actors in LA. There are only a handful of people in Tanglewood. I’m not going to call the newly expectant parents, Bea and Hugo, to the west side in the middle of the night, even if they would come.

Even though I know I can’t call him, that I lost that right, it still hurts to see Sutton’s name. It would be nice to have his steady, capable presence beside me while I do something inadvisable. My finger hovers over his number, not pressing.

And then there’s Christopher, who helped me paint a mural once. I thought I might have fallen in love with him that night, the night he kissed

me, but I think it was earlier than that. When he wrote me a letter at my boarding school in Germany.

When he dived into the water after me.

I'm not sure who I am if I'm not the girl hopelessly in love with Christopher Bardot.

Tonight I'm going to find out.

There's no listing for the Den online. None for Damon Scott, either. Finally I have to call Avery who has connections in the city. She gives me Penny's number, but there's no answer. In the end I have to settle for leaving a message and hoping she gets it in time.

And that she'd even want to help if she knew.

Abdel parks with his headlights angled so I can see what I'm doing. He also orders pizza, which is initiative I appreciate in a man. "I didn't drive you around the city for two hours so you could get murdered," he says when I tell him to leave. I'm pretty sure I'm going to send his daughters to college. I'll be past twenty-five when they need the tuition, finally and forever in charge of that damned trust fund.

By the time Penny arrives, I have the eyes painted, which is no small feat considering I'm using a fifty-dollar ladder that had clearly been used and returned before I bought it. It leans up against metal and glass that's decades old, shaking with every brusque wind. My canvas isn't a wall, not really. It's the entire south side of the building. Mostly windows. Some brick.

The eyes are the most important.

Usually that's true in a portrait, but it's a million times more true right now.

This Cleopatra isn't sexy. Isn't seductive. Unless it turns you on to be with a woman who wants to destroy everything you've worked for, which some perverse men probably do.

She's angry, this one. Determined. Resolute.

They paint her knowing, usually. As if the world is full of puppets she makes dance. I think she knew what she was doing but couldn't have known the outcome. It's an act of sacrifice to throw everything you have toward a cause. Part of you has to be sure you'll lose to even try.

Like the way I know this painting will be demolished at six a.m. There's going to be a wrecking ball right through Cleopatra's face. With every

stroke of these cheap brushes and clumpy paint, I know it’s the best work I’ve ever done. Art with more than prettiness or pride. Something more important than power.

There’s survival, something every woman has had to look in the face.

And sometimes, sometimes we walk into a fight we know we’re going to lose.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

#FREETHELIBRARY

THERE'S A CROWD by the time the construction crew shows up. I expect to see Sutton with them, because he's the one who's always managed them. It's Christopher who appears in a suit and sunglasses, looking like he's already made his mark on the world instead of only beginning. He does not look at all surprised by the crowd that's assembled around us.

At first it was only Penny who came and Damon who followed her. There were men who came to consult with Damon, and I wondered whether that was a regular thing. Whether people showed up at the Den at all hours to whisper some serious thing and receive a response. Probably. Eventually word got out, and people started coming to watch.

The protest takes on a life of its own.

It has a hashtag before I even think to post on Instagram: #freethelibrary. Local businesses pick up on it, some of them more serious than others.

Because books are worth saving! posts a local coffee shop.

Mention #freethelibrary to get 30% off, posts a vintage clothing store.

Along with a random ad for shoes.

Blinding light glints off dark sunglasses. He might as well be a stranger, this man in a suit. He looks that cold standing in front of me. Nothing like the man who shivered in my arms.

He looks around before speaking, not in any rush to tell me he's going to destroy this painting. And the library. "Was this a long game?" he asks finally. "You wanted everyone to hate me after the will reading. I think now it's done."

"I didn't twist your arm into buying a historic building, if that's what you're asking."

"It's not."

My mouth is dry from exhaustion and dehydration and paint fumes. He kissed me once, when I was high on the stuff. It won't happen again. "This wasn't about revenge. No. I would have done this for the library. For me." *For Sutton.*

"Are you going to chain yourself to the front doors?"

That makes me laugh a little. "I don't have a death wish. Not anymore."

He absorbs that for a moment. "Sutton isn't here."

"I can see that." His hair would glint like spun gold in this light. His blue eyes would dance with a thousand things to say. His absence is as loud as a shotgun. "He's at the office?"

"Not likely. He quit after you left."

It's like falling two hundred feet and landing backward in the water. Like having the breath knocked out of me. "What?"

"He didn't send me his itinerary, but I figured he would be in LA by now."

"No," I whisper, because that means I'm too late.

"He can't exactly pull his money out. Can't close the barn doors after the horses have been let out, was the way he put it. But he can resign his position. That was him choosing you over money, in case the grand gesture wasn't clear."

There's no air at all in my lungs. No air in the warm morning mist. I'm left to sink and sink, unable to breathe. Unable to think. Sutton did that for me. He left everything—for me.

The grand gesture I always wanted from Christopher… Another man gave it to me. It makes me wonder how much of the world I've been ignoring in my tunnel vision. How much of life I've been hiding from in pursuit of a man who doesn't want me as much as I wanted him.

Suddenly I can't stand to wait a second longer. Whatever threads of love I felt for Christopher Bardot, they fall to the concrete outside the broken library. Gone.

It doesn't feel like a loss. It feels like being free.

Is Sutton in LA, knocking on my mom's condo right now?

Except she would have called me. And he would have had time to arrive if he followed me quickly. Maybe he hadn't come for me, no matter that Christopher thought he would. He might have left for good, the way a sad

little boy tried to do with a wild horse a long time ago. There would be no water's edge to stop him this time.

Christopher studies the painting through his sunglasses. "Cleopatra?"

There's a hardness to his jaw like it pains him to speak, and as much as I've fought him, I can spare him that. This painting won't be enough to save the library. Nothing will.

"She knows what's coming," I say, softly so no one else hears.

He huffs a laugh. "As it turns out, Sutton was right. You do have the skills of diplomacy we need. You can convince people to do anything. Unfortunately you convinced them to hate us."

I look away and manage a small smile. "And it turns out you were right. It doesn't matter whether they hate you. You have the deed and a wrecking ball."

"It didn't have to be like this," Christopher says, his jaw tight. There's a muscle that works. A slight flare of his nostrils. The slightest signs that he's upset. He had those same signs the day the will was signed, but he would not be swayed then. Not now, either.

Strange, the way I can admire his resolve even as it tears us apart. "It was always like this."

"You can probably make them riot," he remarks, his voice even. "An angry mob."

"To break the windows in? To steal the books? A little counter to the purpose." Besides the breakfast tacos were too delicious. No one could be in a rage after eating breakfast tacos.

"Or they could form a human chain around the building. It would delay construction, if nothing else."

"And cost you money," I say, gentle now. "If nothing else."

"There's that."

"I'm not going to do that. I made my point."

"Which is what?" He looks genuinely lost. It isn't part of advanced economics theory, what's happening in the streets tonight. It's community. History. These are things he doesn't understand.

"The protest isn't to stop you. It isn't even about you, not really. Protest are a voice for people who have been told not to be quiet. It's the only way we can speak."

I’m not so different from Mrs. Rosemont. We protest in different ways, through the historical society and connections to city hall. Through a painting and somewhat less lofty friends I’ve made in Tanglewood. Both of us overruled by bribery.

Money has the loudest voice of all.

He finally takes off his sunglasses, revealing eyes that are dark from lack of sleep. It’s been gnawing at him, this act. Even that won’t stop him. That determination of his is going to break more than the building. It’s going to break him, one of these days.

Once upon a time it broke me.

“That’s it? You tell me it’s wrong and then you leave?”

I look back at my Cleopatra with her sad eyes. She looks resolved to her fate. It’s the best art I’ve ever created. Maybe stronger because I knew it would be destroyed.

Medusa had been different. She’d been angry. Christopher had looked at all that fury and understood it. No, he’d felt it too. The hurt she felt had wrapped itself around him until he felt what she did. If he can understand her then maybe he can understand Cleopatra. It’s not rage she feels, though. It’s determination in the face of unbeatable odds.

“You could stop,” I tell him, one last attempt.

A protest may be a voice, but it’s up to him whether he listens. Up to him whether he lets her strength wrap around him. Up to him whether he looks down at me with admiration in his eyes and kisses me like the world could end around us.

He turns and speaks to the men in the construction crew. *Take the day off,* he could be telling them. Instead one man gets into the big yellow vehicle with a crane and a wrecking ball that’s taller than me attached. Part of me despairs that Sutton isn’t here with me.

That was him choosing you over money, in case the grand gesture wasn’t clear.

He should be standing beside me, holding me. It’s too personal, my relationship with this library. My relationship with Christopher. As if he’s going to plunge that wrecking ball through my heart, instead of the freshly painted face of an ancient Egyptian ruler.

The construction workers move the crowd back, clearing space for them to work.

It’s a random construction worker who climbs into the yellow machinery as the crowd boos and shouts. A mover of levers and knobs. It’s Christopher who gestures with his hand. *Begin*, says that hand. From the moment he was bent over his textbook in that cabin, it’s been leading to this moment. This moment when he would destroy everything.

A crane extends higher and higher, beyond anything else in sight. Taller than any of the buildings around us, including the library. It brushes up against gray clouds.

My stomach pitches forward. The crowd falls silent as the crane pivots and pulls the ball away from the library. Cleopatra’s eyes watch it swing toward her, steady, steady, steady.

The crash might as well be a physical blow. It crushes my lungs and slams into my gut. I’m left reeling, unable to breathe or think or feel anything but pain. Concrete and metal buckle around the ball, which suspends for a moment inside. As it moves away, it leaves a crater so much bigger than its size. Broken wood and brick. Shards of glass.

Cleopatra is gone. Only the shell of her is left—only the outer edges of her sleek black hair, the bottom of her chin. A work that took a whole night to create, gone in a second. It took longer than one night to paint like that. It took my whole life to dream of something more than business and money and power.

It’s only by slow degrees that I realize hands hold my arms. They’re keeping me back, behind the barricade, which means I must have tried to run forward. I didn’t mean to. It wasn’t conscious thought. *Survival*. That’s what it felt like.

The crane pulls back and swings again. Only a little more destruction this time.

It will take much longer to reach the inner sanctum with the wood counter and the carved wall and the bookshelves. I’m not sure I can watch that long.

The wrecking ball breaks me a little bit every time it swings.

A car pulls up at the perimeter, noticeable only because it’s sleek and black and long. A limo, like the kind Daddy used. For a wild second, made uncertain from lack of sleep, I expect to see him step out. *He would stop this.* Except I’m not sure the real Daddy would have. He probably would

have invested with Christopher. Only in my daydreams would he help save it.

It's not Daddy who steps out of the limo, of course. Sunlight limns golden hair. Wrinkles shadow a white dress shirt. The crowd parts for Sutton Mayfair as easily as breathing. He has a way of commanding the world without having to say a word.

Even the man in the crane hits the lever to stop the wrecking ball from a third run.

Somehow Christopher is beside me when Sutton approaches.

He holds up a piece of folded paper. "An injunction."

"Let's see it," Christopher says, his words crisp. He doesn't sound particularly surprised, nor does he sound particularly angry. This could be a discussion over the weather. He reads the length of the paper with an impassive expression.

"Turns out the Tanglewood Historical Society had teeth, after all."

Christopher folds the paper. "This won't hold up on appeal."

"Maybe not," Sutton says, accepting the possibility. "But we're done here for today."

Tears prick my eyes. "You're too late."

Sutton looks at the library where there's no hint a painting had ever stood. Through the heavy dust and wreckage you can see the beautiful carved wall, still standing. "We can repair what's happened here. There wasn't any load on those glass turnstiles. Nothing permanent."

It feels like something permanent has cracked inside me, but I force myself to focus on what he's saying. We can fix the front of the library. It's saved, at least for now.

"You did this?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

Sutton shakes his head, slow. "It was Mrs. Rosemont who filed with the court. I gave information in testimony, but it was her connections that made this happen."

"But why… why would you help stop this? Why did you resign?"

Those blue eyes could reach across the entire city, that's how far he lets me look. This man I doubted. This man I desired. He lets me see the deepest parts of him. "For you," he says, simply.

My throat clenches hard. "I wouldn't have asked you to do this. I couldn't—"

“You didn’t have to ask. I couldn’t be a part of this once I saw how much it meant to you.”

“But your investment.”

He gives me a small smile. “This one wasn’t business. It’s personal.”

And then there’s no way I can hold myself back.

I launch myself at him, feeling every square inch of muscle on him, made tired from whatever he did this long night. He folds me up in his arms. There’s relief and gratitude—and love, in a form more pure than anything I’ve known before. Love without expectation. Without greed. Without jealousy, which I didn’t think was possible. There’s clapping and hooting in the background, but all I can hear is his murmured words in my ear.

“For you,” he whispers again, fierce.

He may show up with a legal document and a casual smile, but it was no small thing. It broke some principles inside him, the same way that wrecking ball broke some old hopes inside me. We aren’t whole people who hold each other. We’re each cracked and bruised, but we have each other. God, we have each other.

It’s only when Sutton turns again, holding me close, that I see Christopher’s dark form against the jarring yellow of the construction equipment. He speaks to the men in quiet terms, his movements decisive and maybe a little stiff. It must have hurt him, this injunction.

It must have hurt him, to lose his business partner.

Did it hurt him any to lose me?

He speaks to me again only when most of the crowd and the construction crew have left. I’m standing in the large foyer of the library, which is quite a bit brighter now that the whole front wall has turned to rubble. Sutton didn’t want to let me in—not until they’ve had engineers to make sure it’s structurally safe, but he let me in as long as he stands beside me. There’s probably something important about that. He’ll let me do anything as long as he can stand beside me. I don’t plan to stay long, since I’m quite certain he’ll throw himself bodily over me if a brick were to fall down.

The beautiful panes of art deco glass have shattered completely, leaving only misshapen metal in their wake, a skeleton without any flesh. It makes me shiver, looking up at that.

Rocks shift as Christopher steps into the space. He leaves several yards between us. Does he despise me now? My stomach clenches. I care about him more than I want to, even now.

“You’ve won,” he says. “For now. The crew decided to start another job.”

Sutton was the good-old boy who convinced them to wait for this project. For all his money and power and determination, even Christopher couldn’t make them wait any longer.

It strikes me again that he doesn’t seem angry. Remote, is how I’d describe it. That makes me worry for him even more, like maybe he’s going through shock. A million dollars is a huge amount of money. Is it gone? Bile rises in my throat. It can’t be gone.

“I’ll buy the library from you,” I say, impulsive.

Before I can realize that Christopher would never accept that, any more than he would dip into my trust fund all these years. That would be unethical. For a man I don’t trust, he’s remarkably trustworthy.

“No,” he says, his voice hard. “Thank you, but no.”

Then he turns and walks away, leaving the two of us in the rubble.

There’s a sense of loss so wide and so deep, my legs feel weak. My eyes close. Sutton is there to catch me this time, his embrace warm and understanding. I’m not the only one who lost someone. “You were friends,” I say, looking back at him. Sutton’s eyes are shadowed to a dark sapphire, his brow furrowed.

“We were.” There’s finality there. “He’s the past. You’re the future.”

And I know he isn’t only talking about his friendship with Christopher. He’s talking about my relationship with Christopher, which has always been too complicated to define. Maybe it doesn’t need to bother me anymore, the amorphous shape of us. It’s over now.

I turn around in Sutton’s strong arms, tilting my head up. “You’re my future.”

He pulls me flush against him, and I feel him harden. His lids lower. Electricity runs from the center of his body to mine, making me ache and flush everywhere. “Christ, I want to take you back to that counter and finish what we started.”

My cheeks turn warm. “There are still people outside. And no doors.”

A low growl vibrates over my skin as he nuzzles my neck. “And strictly speaking I don’t own the library anymore, the company does, and I don’t work for it. We’re trespassing right now.”

Something spears my stomach. We don’t have a right to know what happens to this old library anymore. We gave that up, along with Christopher. Ironic, because he’s the one who wanted to destroy it. There’s nothing here but history and potential.

There’s nothing here for us right now.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

PILE OF RUBBLE

IN THE DAYS that follow I'm alternately called a vandal and a grass roots activist by the local media. The Tanglewood Historical Society invites me to speak at their meeting, which I find ironic enough that I decide to go. Besides, Sutton lives here. We've gone out every night the past week—to Thai restaurants and burlesque clubs. There's no part of the city we don't want to explore, so I might as well put down some roots.

My speech is short and sweet and encourages change through art. There's a small reception afterward with tea and bourbon croissants, which makes me think I might come back to another meeting. If nothing else I'd like to show them we aren't all fist-fights at theatres.

Mrs. Rosemont doesn't seem to hold it against me. She greets me warmly and thanks me for my work in helping save the library. "We thought it was hopeless, near the end."

"I'm glad you had the idea for the injunction," I tell her, sipping the English breakfast tea. It soothes my throat, which feels a little worse for the wear after my speech.

She pauses, looking uncertain. "It wasn't my idea, dear."

"Oh." Sutton must have been modest when he said she filed the paperwork. "Someone suggested that you file the injunction?"

That makes her laugh. "Suggested? No, he wrote it himself. Had the society's name on the paperwork. All we had to do was bring it to the courthouse."

"Sutton can be efficient when he wants to be."

There's a long pause, where Mrs. Rosemont studies her cup of tea as if it holds the secrets of the universe. "I'm not sure I should tell you this."

Unease moves through me. "Tell me what?"

Her gray eyes are soft. “It wasn’t Sutton who wrote that injunction and gave it to me.”

“Then who?” Except I already know. There’s only one person who would figure out the exact method of stopping construction. Only one person who didn’t seem at all surprised that it happened. “Christopher.”

She nods. “Mr. Bardot called me that night. We had to wake up a judge, which was something I helped with. There were other things we needed—the testimony of the partner, for one thing. Sutton Mayfair was called in for that.”

My hands feel cold. And then numb. “I don’t understand.”

“I asked him why,” she says, her voice thoughtful. “He didn’t explain himself. I don’t think a man like that explains himself very often.”

Why had Christopher stopped his own construction?

And why had he hidden that fact? Why signal the construction crew to begin when he knew it would end at any minute? Was he hoping to finish quickly? No, that’s not possible. It would have taken too long. And he didn’t have to file that injunction. The library would be a pile of rubble and dirt right now if he hadn’t done that.

IT FEELS LIKE a betrayal to even stand outside his condo.

Some part of me knows I shouldn’t ask this question. This is the railing of the yacht. And beneath me, black water and sharks. Even being here means I might fall.

My arms don’t move when I tell them to knock. My legs don’t move when I tell them to leave. My body is in full rebellion, keeping me rooted to this spot. I’m the one turned to stone.

The door swings open, and dark eyes widen. Christopher.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you,” I say, hiding my nerves behind a flippant smile. Oh yes, I’m used to this. Brushing past him is easy, even with the big box he’s holding. Maybe because of it. He can’t put it down quick enough to stop me. I push myself up on his granite bar top, swinging my legs.

He follows me more slowly, setting down the box he's carrying beside a stack of others. "If you're here about the trust fund—"

"I talked to the hospital. They told me you approved the funds for the butterfly garden. I told them to name it after Daddy, because it's his money."

Those dark eyes give away nothing. "Your mother's in the trial?"

"We discussed it, but she doesn't want to do it. And I'm okay with that."

He swings away from me, toward the bank of windows. "I have a lot to do today."

"Are you moving?" The boxes already say the answer is yes. Not that many boxes for a nice big condo, but he isn't a man with that many things. That's strange for someone who wants money, who's earned a fair amount of it. It makes me wonder why he wants money, if not to spend it.

He sighs. "I suppose I can tell you, since you're here. I'm leaving Tanglewood."

The news hits me like a wrecking ball to the stomach. "Why?"

A short laugh. "That's a question I've been asking myself frequently."

"And the answer is…"

"The answer is that you'll be more at ease knowing you won't see me around the corner. There's nothing here for me if I'm not going to build a shiny new mall."

"I thought you said the injunction would lose on appeal."

"It will, but by then the construction company will be knee-deep in a real estate development on the other side of the city. That's how these things are played. Timing is everything."

"Timing," I say, tasting the word.

He waves a hand. "It doesn't matter. I'll be out of your hair soon enough."

"Are you going to build your mall somewhere else?"

"Maybe," he says, noncommittal, but I read the answer in the hard set of his jaw. Not right away, because his money is tied up in a building that he can't touch.

"Mrs. Rosemont told me you were the one who wrote that injunction." The words spill out of me like a dam has opened. I'm shaking with relief to have them out. "Why would you do that, Christopher? You're the one who wanted that place torn down."

“I didn’t want it torn down.”

“Um, excuse me. I think I would remember if you said, ‘Harper, let’s leave the library up and save all the books and priceless architectural details.’”

“I wanted something new built. That’s not the same thing as wanting it torn down.”

“It is when there’s a wrecking ball involved.”

His eyes dance with something like humor. “Fair enough. So it’s not going to be torn down. That’s what you wanted. So why are you here?”

“I’m here because you lied to me.”

One eyebrow rises. “I didn’t lie.”

“You should have told me you filed that injunction. Instead you told the construction people to start tearing it down, knowing, *knowing* it would be stopped.”

His voice is mild. “Like I said, timing is everything.”

“You wanted me to think Sutton had saved the library.”

He turns away, and I know I’ve guessed right. “Does it matter? He did help.”

I cross the room and stand in front of Christopher. It hurts to look at those dark eyes, knowing what he’s done. Somehow it hurts worse to know he saved the library. “Why?”

“Hell,” he says roughly. “You know why.”

I don’t want to hear this, but I can’t make myself walk away. It’s everything I ever wanted from him. *Too late, too late.* “Spell it out for me.”

“The only reason I was in this city was for you. Because you loved it here, with Avery. Because I thought you belonged here. Turns out you do belong here—with someone else.”

“Why would that matter to you?”

An uneven laugh. “Because I’ve loved you every day since that goddamned will reading. Every day since I dived into the water after you. Probably from the moment I saw you walking up that dock the first day.”

My stomach pitches. “Then why didn’t you fight for me?”

“Oh, there’s a million answers to that one. Stubbornness. Stupidity.”

“And at the end?”

“At the end, you wanted Sutton to be the one to save the library.”

“So you gave it to me,” I whisper, my heart fracturing.

We’re standing only an inch apart. His eyes might as well be a fathomless night sky, deep in the city without a single star. With nothing to guide me. We stood like this in front of Medusa, and he kissed me. She watched us without judgment or fear, the same way the city watches us now.

His head lowers. There’s not time to breathe or think.

When his lips touch mine, there are a thousand stars lit up. I’m the one burning inside the open space of him. I’m the one made hot and raging. He dips his tongue against my lower lip, testing me, tasting me, soothing the wild heat inside with a smooth, dark movement.

A sound comes from the door.

It takes me a while to come back into my body from the places I’ve been. To feel the mechanics of my bones and joints and muscles. To make myself step back. When I do, I can see the door which hangs open behind Christopher.

Sutton stands in the doorway, his blue eyes stark and cold. A lake that’s frozen over. There’s no way to explain what’s happened here, not when I don’t understand it myself. No excuses for the fact that Christopher’s hand is clenched in my hair. He releases me slowly, finger by finger. Prying himself away. That’s how it feels. He takes one step back. Another.

I watch as he becomes the man from after the will reading. I watch as he becomes a stranger. An enemy. “You were just leaving.”

There are razors in my chest. They turn against me, leaving only ribbons of wanting, the remains of a pointless dream. “Is that why you were kissing me? Because the only way you can touch me is if you know it means goodbye?”

The words hit their mark, an arrow in the heart of a stone. He turns cold. “Does it matter? You have what you wanted.”

Hurt crowds my throat. I cover it up with suspicion. “Sutton?”

“The trust fund. It’s your money. Use it however you want. Buy a thousand goddamned butterflies.”

He leaves me with that terrible victory, having won control of the fortune that should have been mine, having lost the man who never belonged to me. The man I’ve always wanted more than he wants me. Sutton turns sharply to give Christopher his exit, careful not to touch him.

No punches thrown. That should be a relief to me. It feels like I took the hit to my stomach instead.

I half expect Sutton to storm out of the apartment, but he stands in front of me. Stands with me in the rubble of trust around us, figurative dust floating in the air, the way we were at the library. He's the past, he said then. Christopher's taste is still on my tongue.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Sutton says, his gaze past my shoulder, to the wall of windows beyond.

Words crowd my throat, words of apology, but loss steals my voice. I should have learned this by now, that life couldn't be trusted.

That anything good was only temporary—especially men.

I could say that I didn't initiate this, that I didn't come here for this. That it was Christopher who kissed me. But I didn't stop him. And in my secret heart, I know the truth—I didn't want to stop him. Sometimes a woman has to face a wrecking ball coming toward her with steady eyes. She knows what's coming. That's what I told Christopher. The library might recover. Cleopatra won't.

"I'm sorry." My voice comes out raw. "That shouldn't have happened."

"No? After what we did in your hotel room I don't think I had any claims of monogamy. You can kiss whoever you want."

Those same words might come from a man with no desire for commitment. Instead they're filled with a dark amusement. It makes me remember the glint in his eyes when he watched Christopher take my virginity. The way his Southern charm had slipped for a moment, revealing a cunning underneath. "Whoever I want, as long as you're in the room, pulling the strings. Is that how you like it?"

There's heat in those blue eyes. Betrayal and hurt, but enough heat to blaze like summer. "That's how you liked it, too. I remember how hard you came, honey. Your beautiful thighs trembling. Wet enough to soak the sheets."

My body responds with suddenness, warmth spreading through my body, a wildfire in a dry forest. This isn't the time to be aroused. Sutton must know that. He watches me with that same cunning beneath the surface. It makes me want to toss a pebble into it, to make him ripple. "Why did you come here? Are you following me?"

"It was only a matter of time before you came to see Christopher."

“That means yes.”

“Do you want me to apologize?” He drawls the word, making it sound like a mockery. Except he should apologize for following me. And like he said, we hadn’t made any promises of monogamy, no matter how shameful I felt to be caught kissing someone else.

Tanglewood is a blade. I’m torn in two pieces, one that loves Christopher. That’s always loved Christopher in all his terrible ambition. And one half that loves Sutton, the man of few words and dangerous trust, the man staring at me like I’m the enemy. “I don’t think you’re that concerned with what I want. This is some sort of game for you, and you’ve been playing since I first met you in the boardroom.”

“You’re a beautiful woman. A man would be crazy not to want you.”

“Except that’s not why you wanted me. It was a competition with Christopher.” The certainty makes my stomach turn inside out. “That’s why you pursued me from the beginning, why you invited me to the gala, why you made me the offer about the historical society.”

Blue eyes glitter. Why have I never seen how much they look like a hard gem? A stone made beautiful and sharp. “You want to question my motives, honey? You’re the one who came storming into the office like a woman on a crusade. Looking for Christopher.”

The words echo in the air around us. *Looking for Christopher*, he says while we stand in Christopher’s empty apartment. “I didn’t know,” I whisper, my throat burning. “I didn’t know that I loved him.”

And how for me to realize it, when there’s no hope of a happy ending. No solace for me now. No permanence in a gilded world.

Sutton gives me a small smile, this one small and true. “Honest,” he says, a little sad. “Honest to a fault.”

It would have been impossible to choose between these two men, but sometimes love doesn’t give you a choice. The heart has its own balance sheet. It makes its own calculations. I’m the last person to find out what it decides.

I leave the cold, sterile apartment alone, walking down concrete steps to a waiting black car. It’s little comfort that I control the trust fund, that I control my own fortune. I’m one of the richest women in the country. In the world. Money can’t buy love or trust or safety. It can’t stop a thousand

pounds of forged steel when it’s already swinging toward me. It can’t make the pain disappear.

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THE EVOLUTION OF MAN

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PROLOGUE

PLUS INTEREST

Dear Christopher,

Enclosed you'll find a formal offer to purchase the land and building of Bardot and Mayfair Development Parcel A, formerly known as the Tanglewood Library. Enclosed you will find terms equal to the last sale price plus interest. I hope you find this more than reasonable for a property that's currently sitting unused and half turned to rubble.

PS. And you know a library will help the community and revitalize the west side of the city.

Dear Harper,

I regret to inform you that the asking price of the property has increased significantly, due to recent media interest. A famous artist sparked a citywide protest that had its own hashtag. In fact looters were able to sell pieces of painted concrete for up to five thousand dollars online. As such Bardot and Mayfair cannot accept less than two billion dollars.

PS. I wonder how much concrete you'd have to sell to fill the library with new books?

Dear Christopher,

Twenty times what you paid for it? I hardly think the presence of some random painter with an Instagram account can possibly raise the value that much. Besides the fact that anyone will have to pay to reconstruct the entire front of the building, due to your wrecking ball.

PS. You are the most self-centered, arrogant bastard I’ve ever met.

Dear Harper,

Enclosed you’ll find copies of the purchase offers this company has received in the months since we stopped development on the property. As you can plainly see, the presence and painting of a world-renowned, extremely talented artist has made the property invaluable.

PS. Don’t sell yourself short.

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CHAPTER ONE

REAL ESTATE

"WHAT DO YOU think?" the real estate agent asks, smiling bright-white teeth with a smudge of red lipstick. I can't blame her for being a little faded. We've been all over Tanglewood looking for the perfect house. There are Victorians and chateaus and three-story high-rise condominiums. There was a beautiful mid-century modern that I probably would have chosen.

This decision isn't up to me, though. Mom's the one who chooses.

She's the one who has to live here. And she's the one who has to die here.

I wander up the steps toward the white columns that line the front. "It's definitely big."

That's an understatement. Most of the houses in our price range are mansions, because we need the privacy more than the space. Large houses mean large grounds.

"Twelve bedrooms," the real estate agent assures me.

Mom leans to smell a wide, blooming hydrangea. "What are you going to do with all that space?"

"They'll be useful when we throw wild sex parties," I say lightly, because it's easier to pretend everything's fine than falling apart. "When people want privacy, they can go upstairs and leave a sock on the doorknob."

The real estate agent can't seem to figure out whether we're joking. She fumbles with the lock for a moment, trying to juggle her phone and a folder with notes about the house. "Five acres," she tells us. "And you saw the gate when we entered. The security system is completely updated."

She finally gets the door open, and we step inside.

Mom sucks in a breath. "Oh my God."

A large staircase covered in an antique rug curves up to a wide balcony. A chandelier made of crystal drops shimmers from the sunlight we're letting in. Elaborate wood paneling covers the wall, made especially intricate around an archway.

The real estate agent nods. "It's like the plantation house from *Gone with the Wind*. You can almost imagine that Scarlett will come running down the stairs with her sisters."

The movie was actually filmed near where we lived, in the backyard of the filming studios, the house left to rot away once it had served its purpose. In contrast this house seems vibrant. It's fitting that we would come from somewhere pretend to the real thing.

"Could you give us a minute?" I ask the agent.

When we're alone, my mother lets out a blissful sigh. "It's perfect."

"Will you be comfortable here?" I ask because that's all there is right now. Not time. Sand whips through the funnel at an alarming rate. There's only comfort, and how much my trust fund can buy.

She gives me a rueful smile. "Now that I've seen this, I can't imagine being comfortable anywhere else."

I look at the staircase dubiously. It's beautiful but not really practical, especially for someone who has stage four cancer. "Maybe we can have an elevator put in. Or one of those chairs that zooms along the balcony."

A horrified look. "Don't even think about it. You will not do anything to destroy these stairs. It would be a travesty. They're so beautiful, Harper."

"Oh fine, I'm sure we can rig some kind of pulley system."

She laughs a little. "There won't be enough time to worry about it."

How can she laugh about this? It's one thing to be flippant in front of the real estate agent, but when we're like this, being honest, all I want to do is break down. My stomach flips over, and I have to look away through the arched doorway. "God."

"I'm sorry," she says, immediately contrite. "I know this is hard for you."

"No," I tell her, because hard is a test on calculus. Hard is knowing I'll inevitably see Sutton or Christopher again. This is more than hard; it's unbearable. "I'm the one who's sorry. We can buy this house, stairs or elevator or pulley system. Or hell, we can buy the original set back in LA, if

that’s what you want. We’ll still be able to get fresh wheatgrass delivered every morning.”

She smiles. “We should be here.”

My throat tightens up, because no matter how hard I try, I seem to mess this up. She could have asked me for every cent in the damn trust fund. I’d have climbed the highest mountain or crawled into the deepest cave to find a cure. Instead she asked for something else—acceptance.

“Why Tanglewood? You never even visited here before this week.”

“Because this city has what you need.”

I scrunch my nose. “The library? I don’t need to oversee the reconstruction personally.”

“Nonsense. This is your project. You should be here for it. And besides, it’s not only the library. Tanglewood has the people you love.”

“Mom, I told you—”

“You do love Avery, don’t you?” she asks, sounding completely innocent. “She’s your best friend, and she’s taking the semester off to work on her thesis. That means she’ll be in town.”

My throat feels tight. “I’m not going to suddenly get married and have a baby.”

My mom has never pushed me to settle down, because she knows the dangers of that more than anyone. And now she’ll never see me walk down the aisle. Never meet any grandchildren. The doctors have given her three to six months to live. Three to six months. How do they even calculate that?

There might have been three more months if she’d been willing to try their grueling treatment—or ironically, the treatment could have killed her faster.

She’s asked me to accept her decision, and mostly I have. There isn’t a protest I can stage that will change her mind. I’ve accepted it, but that doesn’t make it any less painful to bear.

“And Bea,” she murmurs, still pretending to be clueless. We’re staying with Bea and Hugo in their comfy penthouse until we find our own place. “You love her and Hugo. They’re a darling couple.”

I give her a droll look. “Is that the end of the list?”

“For now. I’m sure you’ll learn to love more people once you’ve lived in Tanglewood longer.”

The banister shakes a little when I touch it, and I think we'll have to get a carpenter in here before it's safe enough to move in. If my mother wants a grand staircase to descend every morning, then that's what she'll get. I can't give her relief from the pain, but my God, I can give her stairs.

"I messed it up," I whisper because she needs to understand.

I don't know how to love someone without the taint of money. I don't know how to have a relationship with a man where I'm not waiting for him to leave. There's something dangerous inside me; it grows and grows, eating away at everything good and hopeful and trusting. I don't know if I ever loved Sutton, if I ever could have loved him, but we didn't get that far.

And as for Christopher? I'm not sure he's capable of loving anyone.

Her hand covers mine on the gleaming banister. "Harper."

The softness of her voice reaches deep inside me. We've lived in a hundred different houses. None of them were ever ours. They belonged to one of her husbands. Some of those men were upfront about not wanting a little stepdaughter underfoot. Others pretended to be interested in me. They bought me Barbie doll limos and stuffed dogs with puppies inside them, but eventually they were all the same.

They all kicked us out in the end.

"You don't have to make my mistakes," she says, except her eyes are the same hazel gold as my own. It's like looking in a mirror. She's somehow more beautiful with age, but it doesn't make her happy.

"Don't I?" I didn't get left behind by one man, but two. She only knows about Sutton, but when I close my eyes there's two men walking away from me. I have enough distance from what happened six months ago to know it was Christopher who I really wanted. Enough distance to know that Sutton is the closest I've ever come to really having love, the kind that is given and received and untarnished by money. I had him, and I let him go.

"Love isn't supposed to be painful."

"Then why does it hurt?" Christopher never did anything so mundane, so hopeful as ask me on a date. He never offered himself to me, so why did I keep choosing him?

Her small smile tears my heart in two. "I'm hoping you figure that out the way that I never could. I fell in love with the wrong man, hard enough that there was never any real chance with me and someone else after that. There's still time for you, Harper."

“I’m not here to date anyone. And definitely not Sutton.”

She makes a noncommittal sound. “Everything will work out.”

Except my mother has stage four cancer and refuses treatment. The library is broken beyond repair. Everything in my life is falling apart, so how will it work out? I touch a carved wood finial that’s part of the railing. It’s easier to lie when I’m not looking at her. “Okay.”

“Harper. Look at me.”

It takes me five seconds. I count down in my head. I can’t take anything for granted these days—not the ability to stand up straight or hold my head high. Not the ability to look at my mother without incriminating tears burning my eyes.

She gives me a gentle smile. “I talked to a hospice in the city.”

My heart does a strange pitter-patter, like it’s beating enough times for a year but all at once and uneven. Heat and cold courses through me, one after the other. It’s like my body’s electrical system is shorting out. “I thought you didn’t want that.”

“I don’t want to live there, but they have a home-based program.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, they have nurses who come help me.”

“I can do that.” Even though helping means watching my mom lose her functionality, piece by piece. Two weeks ago I had to help her open a jar of unsweetened organic peanut butter. And then I hid in the pantry and cried for two hours.

“You’re not here to wait on me,” she says with a laugh. “Anyway, I spoke to the care transition counselor on the phone. She’s coming to the house later this week so we can work on the Death Plan. That’s what they call it. Isn’t that funny?”

All the crazy electrical voltage disappears. There’s a flat line where my heartbeat had been. I might as well be made of stone, that’s how numb I feel suddenly. “What?”

“It’s just a name, Harper.”

“I’m not—No—”

“This is something that will help all of us. Especially you.”

“I will buy this house and I will live here and I will do anything you want, but I’m not going to make a Death Plan.” Even the library is a kind of tribute, whether she knows it or not—fixing the unfixable, bringing it back

from the brink. I had to accept my mother's decision to stop treatment, but that doesn't mean I'm going to embrace her death. I'm not going to *plan* for it.

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CHAPTER TWO

DEEP POCKETS

THERE ARE VERY few things in my control right now. I make only a single demand in the purchase of the library—that Christopher Bardot meet with me personally. I want him to look me in the eye when he signs these documents. Part of me is afraid of what I'll find, but I need to know. Did he ever care about me? He manipulated me to save the library, only to hold it hostage for a hefty chunk of my trust fund. The same trust fund he fought so hard to protect. He's an enigma wrapped in a mystery, and I'm determined to peel away at least a few layers at our meeting.

His acceptance comes back in the form of a hand-couriered, notarized letter. He agrees to the meeting, it says, as long as it happens at a restaurant of his choosing.

It raises the stakes, taking a business meeting and making it happen like a date.

I should be immune to that kind of manipulation, but there's still hope inside me, buried deep with barely any sunlight. He might hold my hand across the table and tell me that he loves me. That he wants to develop the library together. Those kinds of fantasies are ridiculous. If that's what he wanted he would have said so from the start instead of making me pay so much.

A limo arrives at seven pm on the dot, its back seat empty. I hide my disappointment from the driver as I step inside. Streetlights flash over my face as we cross Tanglewood.

Koi is the hottest restaurant in Tanglewood with a waiting list six months long for a reservation. Naturally that is where we end up. Is this some kind of power play? I'm not sure why he would need more power in a negotiation where he already set the terms.

He’s taking you here because he secretly loves you, my heart helpfully supplies.

If he loves you why hasn’t he said so? my brain fires back.

Every muscle in my body is strung tight like strings in a violin, being strummed with every step I take. A crowd gathers outside the restaurant, all of them trying to fit into the small bar area that doesn’t require reservations. The air smells like wine and cheese and sex, a decadent combination.

A slender blond hostess gives me a rather harsh once over. Maybe my black suit isn’t what women usually wear here, but this is a business dinner. If the setting is a power move by Christopher, then the suit is my response. And on the one percent chance he’s here to declare his love for me?

Don’t sell yourself short, he wrote in that letter.

If that’s what happens at least my legs looks pretty hot in this pencil skirt, if I do say so myself.

The hostess leads me deep into the restaurant, closer and closer to the kitchen, until I’m wondering if she’s going to push me out the back door. She pushes through the sleek swinging doors that reveal bustling men and women wearing white, steam rising from cast iron pots, delicious scents swirling through the air. A small table is set up only a few feet away from the bustle, a pristine white tablecloth on it, a bottle of Dom chilling in an ice bucket.

Christopher stands, impeccable in a black suit that neatly mirrors mine.

Without the cleavage, of course.

“Good evening,” he says, as casually as if he saw me last week instead of six months ago.

“Christopher,” I say, in case he hasn’t noticed. A table like this is reserved for VIPs or very special guests. Or ones with deep pockets. “This is the chef’s table. We’re sitting at the chef’s table in Koi.”

“Is that good? I thought they just ran out of regular tables.”

“Did you just make a joke. Oh my God. You did.”

The chef chooses that moment to introduce himself, a rather effusive man with a comforting smile and a thick Japanese accent. He says he’ll forgive that we drink champagne as long as we try the sake pairing he sends with every course. And he personally serves the amuse bouche, a tuna sashimi lollie on a fennel cilantro salad with ponzu dressing that makes me moan despite myself.

“Dear God,” I say when we’re alone again, my eyes still closed with the wonder of that single bite. There’s salt and citrus, and basically this is what heaven tastes like. “Did you spend all two billion dollars to get this table? Because it’s worth it.”

When I open my eyes Christopher is watching me, a strange expression on his face. He hasn’t touched the plate in front of him. He seems more interested in the way that I dip my finger in the ponzu dressing and lime foam to savor the last drops. I’m not sure that love is on the table, but if the glitter in his eyes is anything to go by, sex is definitely an option.

“One billion,” he says, almost absently.

I blink. “What?”

“Only one billion is mine. The other half belongs to Sutton.”

It’s like a bucket of cold water dumped over my head. “Why did you bring me here?”

One dark eyebrow rises. “You’re the one who insisted we meet in person.”

“And you’re the one who brought me here.”

The long pause that follows isn’t filled with hearts and roses. He does not secretly love me, and I feel like a fool for even considering the possibility. Because he took me out to dinner? It’s really a good thing I don’t date much, because I’m terrible at it.

“I invested in the restaurant,” he says finally. “It helps to have your take.”

“Because I have such a refined palate?”

“Because you were born rich,” he says, his voice flat. “You know what rich people like.”

It takes my breath away, and I’m left staring at him with the most incredible taste on my tongue. That’s all I am to him? A rich girl with nothing better to do with my time than give him advice on his new restaurant? Meanwhile I was gullible enough to think he actually wanted to spend time with me. It isn’t right. It isn’t fair, but then Christopher Bardot has never played fair.

The chef returns with an oyster for each of us, with a strawberry fish sauce, compressed strawberries, and coriander blossoms. It’s definitely the most beautiful oyster I’ve ever seen. Christopher is the one who takes a bite first, letting it slide into his mouth in a graceful movement. He closes his

eyes, clearly enjoying the taste, and my cheeks turn warm as I realize I must have looked like this when I ate the amuse bouche—like someone having an orgasm.

I have actually had sex with Christopher Bardot but sitting to the side in the busy kitchen of a hip restaurant, watching him make that face feels like watching something private.

And regardless of whether he wants my rich-person opinion of the restaurant, I have no desire to sit here and be turned on by a man who doesn't even like me.

"The papers," I manage to say, my voice a little hoarse. I have to clear my throat and try it again, before they come out clear enough to understand. "Where are the papers?"

"Try the oyster," he says, and because I'm weak, I'm so weak, I actually do.

I have a feeling this evening is going to crash and burn and I *really* want to taste the oyster. It slides onto my tongue with a burst of flavor, the strawberries almost unrecognizable this way, tart and lush and cold. It's like a crisp bite of the ocean. *Oh God*. My eyes close. I'm making the face. I *know* I'm making the face, but I can't stop. It's so good.

When I actually open my eyes again, my muscles are lax. My defenses are down. It's like I really did have an orgasm right here in this black wooden chair with mother-of-pearl inlays along the sides. Pleasure still lingers in my body, like warm honey on the inside.

"I didn't bring them," Christopher says, and it's like another ice-water bucket.

"Are you serious? Why not?"

"I forgot."

"I don't think you've forgotten anything the entire time I've known you. You probably have a photographic memory, don't you? There's no way you forgot."

A shrug. "Maybe."

"Is this a game to you?" I left my mother in the *Gone with the Wind* house by herself, and I know she'll be fine without me for a few hours. But something could happen. Inevitably something *will* happen, and this man is playing around with my time like it's nothing.

“A game.” He seems to consider it seriously. “No. It’s not fun enough for a game.”

I stand up, throwing my napkin down on the empty oyster shell. “You know what? Go ahead and mail me the papers. I don’t know why I asked to meet with you. You are worse than self-centered, Christopher. Worse than arrogant. Now you’re just downright mean.”

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CHAPTER THREE

PILE OF RUBBLE

IT NEVER CEASES to surprise me that I tumble headfirst into holes that I've dug myself.

Or in this case, tripped over a piece of concrete that I painted in peaceful protest, which caused a halt to the construction of a shiny new strip mall where an abandoned library had stood. The marble floor catches my fall, sending shocks of pain up my arms and knees.

"Are you okay?" Avery asks, peering from the heavy plastic tarp behind me.

"Never better," I say, dusting my hands off. "But watch your step."

She glances around the large space with those wide Bambi eyes. God, no wonder Gabriel Miller went after this woman. He would have wanted her even if she hadn't auctioned off her virginity like fresh meat in the middle of the forest. "Are you sure it's safe to be here?"

It's definitely not safe. "I'm sure no one's going to stop us. They mostly put up the barricades because people kept stealing pieces of concrete, which is crazy considering there are shelves full of old and rare books inside."

"The concrete was selling for so much money online," Avery says, her tone overly reasonable. "Then there was that one chunk with Cleopatra's eye—"

"Can we not talk about that?"

"The bidding got to five figures, didn't it?"

I glare at her. "We're here to talk about construction plans, right?"

She bends to examine a small piece of concrete where an inch of white paint remains. "You have to own the building before you can start construction."

"Oh, I own it."

"Christopher sold it to you?" She sounds surprised.

It surprised me, too. Christopher Bardot might be cold and arrogant, but he has a strict moral code. Strict enough that he would never steal from my trust fund. That's what I thought, until he made a veritable fortune selling me a pile of concrete. It makes me feel betrayed, which in turn makes me feel foolish, because I know better than to trust a man.

"All for the low bargain price of two billion dollars."

Her mouth drops open. "What?"

My smile feels grim. "That's what it's worth now. I had independent appraisers confirm it. It's definitely the most expensive pile of rubble I've ever seen."

We cross the room together in silence—hers thoughtful, mine full of useless frustration. Losing the money doesn't bother me. The fact that Christopher demanded it does.

The heavy plastic sheeting blocks out most of the light from the front, leaving only the broken stained-glass atrium shining down on us. There are still sheets of paper in stacks on the circular desk. Still a few books stacked haphazardly. Still the wall—carved with industrious people mingling with the four elements.

"It's beautiful," Avery breathes.

Her taste runs more to Hellenic art, but I knew she'd appreciate the wall. Beautiful, even though it has a huge crack in the middle. It looks like a wound in flesh, a gash made from some giant from one of her Greek myths wielding an ancient weapon.

Twenty feet of butternut wood carvings climb the back of the library. It feels like a single, impossibly large slab of wood even though it's constructed like puzzle pieces—stylized waves jutting against wheat-filled plains, an angled man wielding an ax set against a bursting sunrise. It fits together as if drawn in smooth strokes, made from imagination and sheer will instead of months of painstaking labor.

I touch the tip of a wood-made ocean wave, almost a caress. "This piece belongs to the community. The way they work and break and hope. You can feel its heart here."

"I can feel it beating," she says, awed.

"It was about two minutes and twenty feet from being a pile of splinters."

She traces a constellation with her forefinger. “God. Lucky you were here, then. I don’t think anyone could have saved it except you. You are the only one crazy enough to do it.”

Her voice has reverence, taking the sting out of the observation. And I understand where she’s coming from. I’m the one who buys a multi-million dollar antebellum mansion because my mother likes the columns in the front. I’m the one who stages a protest on the steps of an old library. That’s Harper, someone you can count on to be over the top.

I glance toward the front of the library, where most of the wall and glass doors have crumbled. The wrecking ball didn’t reach all the way to the back wall, but it still managed to harm it. It was sold as a teardown property, only useful for the land to rebuild something new.

My over-the-top ideas aren’t always practical.

“So far I haven’t found a construction company willing to take on the project. They’re insisting the only thing to do is bulldoze it.”

The building itself seems to shudder, on the verge of collapse. It wasn’t like this when I left it six months ago, but it wouldn’t have mattered. The purchase price is based on razing the library to the ground, on turning the carvings into sawdust. This is my chance to save it.

The men in these carvings build and lift and break. They don’t bow to the land, but they’re yoked to it all the same, strong and somehow surrendered. These men in their newsboy caps and heavy boots shouldn’t be familiar, but they are. The potent drive inside them that makes them human, the limitless thirst for something more.

“I can’t stop looking at it,” she says, her gaze lifted.

God, they shouldn’t remind me of modern-day men with their suits and their cunning. Their limitless ambition for things they weren’t born with. They shouldn’t soften me toward Christopher Bardot, because that would make me vulnerable. Again.

I touch the wide gouge, a sympathetic throb of pain in my finger. “It’s a survivor.”

She nods as if I’ve said something profound. “You’re right, but it’s more than that. Survival is about staying the same. This piece is about yearning.”

My stomach clenches, because it’s useless to yearn. Didn’t I learn that after watching Daddy marry over and over while my mother struggled to pay the rent?

Didn’t I learn that after wanting two men and ending up alone?

She’s right though. The way the men rise above their struggles, the way they reach even higher. It’s a monument to longing, which is terrifying, because that can only lead to disappointment.

I snatch my hand back, determined to hide the strange tightening in my chest.

Walking through a high archway, I step deeper into the library. All the construction people I talked to seemed to agree: the part of the building with the books is the most stable. Unfortunately they also agree that the main hall, the part with the gorgeous stained-glass dome at the top, the priceless carved wall, the rare blue-gold marble mosaic floor, is not.

Avery gasps when she follows me. It’s an impressive sight, all this history. All these stories. How many hands turned the pages? How many questions were answered?

She runs her fingers across the spines. “Fairy tales,” she moans, sounding almost orgasmic. “There’s a whole section for fairy tales. I could die right here.”

“Please don’t. Gabriel would definitely kill me.”

Dust rises in the air as she pulls a faded clothbound book from the shelf. “Once upon a time, there was a miller who had a beautiful daughter,” she reads, her forefinger on the yellowed page. “He told the king his daughter could spin straw into gold.”

“What I never understood about this story is, why would he lie? It seems like something that would be easy enough to verify. Didn’t he know that would come next?”

She shrugs. “It’s not really about the miller. The story is about his daughter.”

“The one who can’t spin straw into gold.”

A sudden grin. “That’s kind of what you did, isn’t it? Turned those pieces of concrete and splashes of paint into gold. That’s pretty magical of you, miller’s daughter.”

I groan. “You aren’t going to let that go, are you?”

“Nope.”

“The only reason my protest was such big news is because Christopher tried to tear down the library. He’s the one who gave me the cause to protest.”

“Like Rumpelstiltskin,” she says, her tone musing. “She could only do it with his help.”

A horrible thought occurs to me. A horrible, terrible, painful thought. One that makes my limbs turn cold. “Oh my God, did he do it on purpose? Was that his plan all along?”

“What are you talking about?”

“He knew I would stage the protest and then the land would be worth more, which would give him way more profit and a lot faster than actually developing it.” Christopher made more money this way than his stupid mall —and he made it a lot faster, too.

She looks dubious. “That would be really… diabolical.”

“Exactly. He’s *so* diabolical. If we look up the word ‘diabolical’ in one of the old dictionaries here, there will be Christopher’s face with his dark eyes and cheekbones.”

“His cheekbones.” She snorts. “I don’t know if he did it on purpose, but if he did… well, it’s interesting that he knows you that well. Well enough to predict what you’d do.”

Interesting? No, it’s terrible. Because I don’t know that man at all. I never thought he’d use me. I believed him when he said he wanted to build that shiny new mall. Believed him when he said he planned to tear down the library.

And I believed him when he said he wouldn’t hurt me.

“Do you really think he did it on purpose?” Avery asks softly, her soft gaze on the old ink. “It would have been easier to just siphon money out of your trust fund.”

I wrap my arms around myself. Is it possible? Avery’s gaze is warm and concerned. The certainty settles deep inside me, a knot in my stomach. Yes, it’s very possible. Likely, even.

He used me. He predicted what I would do.

“Christopher isn’t the kind of man who wants things easy. He would have considered that cheating. But manipulating people? He considers that fair game. He knows I’ve protested before. Only this time I had connections and a social media platform. And voila!”

“He isn’t your father,” Avery says softly.

“Isn’t he?” Another man who values money over kindness, who places his ambition ahead of the women in his life. “He could have sold me the

library for what they paid for it. He could have doubled the sale price and still made a nice profit."

The realization puts a stop to whatever fantasy I'd been spinning in my head about Christopher Bardot suddenly realizing he were in love with me. I kind of wish we were at Koi again, just so I could throw another oyster shell in his face.

After I've swallowed what's inside of course. It was too delicious to waste.

Her nose scrunches. "It is kind of mean."

A shiver runs through me, because that's what I called him last night. Mean. Has he crossed the same Rubicon that my father did? Or was Christopher always this way, with me too wide-eyed infatuated to know it? "How are you and Gabriel?" I ask because I need to hear something positive. There's a rich and ambitious man who doesn't think loving someone makes him weak. Those two are crazy in love, despite their wicked beginning—or maybe because of it.

"We're good." She closes the book of fairy tales and walks back into the main hall.

Surprise freezes me where I stand. It takes me a full minute to follow her and demand an explanation. "Good. Good? What happened to *I love Gabriel, he's the best, and he gives me so many orgasms*?"

A blush darkens her cheeks. "Well, there are still orgasms."

"Does he snore?" I ask sympathetically.

"What? No."

"Don't tell me he forgot your anniversary."

"It's not that." A notch forms between her eyebrows. "At least I don't think so. I'm pretty bad with dates actually. It's just that he's been working so much lately. And traveling a lot."

Unease moves through my stomach. "I thought he came with you to Tanglewood."

She's a graduate student at Smith College, working toward her doctorate, only here at the tail end of summer break. He's a businessman with international investments. There are natural struggles to them being together, but they always seemed ridiculously happy. Always kissing and snuggling—and Gabriel is not the natural snuggling type.

He can't seem to help himself with Avery. Or at least he couldn't before.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” she says in a too-bright voice. “Besides, if he were here, he never would have let me come to the library. This place looks like it’s about to fall down on our heads.”

A bird flies in through the atrium above us, disturbing a few shards of the stained-glass window that used to protect us. They fall down with a long dive to the ground, landing in a pile of other rubble. Dust follows it down in a light flurry of exclamation. No, the building hasn’t gone unscathed from the wrecking ball. There are cracks in the very heart of it.

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CHAPTER FOUR

GOLD RUSH

IN FIFTH GRADE my friend had a birthday party at her family's country house, where the stables were climate-controlled and the horses had elaborate braids in their manes. That place bears no resemblance to the massive stable behind the house, its doors wide open to welcome the sun, the packed ground somehow more comfortable than a glossy synthetic flooring. Horses stand in clean bays, watching me with lazy curiosity from their sideways eyes.

Another set of wide-open doors leads me back outside.

Paddocks link across the land as far as the eye can see, connected by high rustic wood gates and bristling with a kind of raw potential. This is a place where nature still holds her power, where man tests himself against her and sometimes loses.

A glint of light off metal. My gaze snaps to a large paddock at the base of a hill. I'm drawn toward it as if pulled by an invisible string, the thread made of reluctant excitement and a base female instinct to seek strength.

There's a horse in the middle of the paddock, its body held taut, the stomp of its foreleg nervous. A pale blonde and white dappled coat makes her look otherworldly. I don't have experience with horses beyond birthday parties and Renaissance fair pony rides, but there's no doubt in my mind that this is still a wild animal—which means the man who wants to tame her is in danger. A free spirit doesn't want to be broken.

Sutton strolls in a wide arc, his posture deceptively relaxed, his blue eyes alert on the animal penned in with him. His heather-gray T-shirt clings to his muscles, the back darker with sweat. Worn jeans sketch the powerful lines of his thighs better than a bespoke suit ever could.

"Whoa there," he's saying, his voice low and soothing. "I'm not going to hurt you, beautiful. You're safe here. We'll take as long as you need to

believe it.”

God, no wonder this man can tame horses. I’m halfway pliant from hearing him murmur promises of safety and patience. There’s something unique about Sutton, a core of absolute sincerity, a sensation deep in my bones that I can trust him.

“Do the horses ever talk back?” I say, my voice soft. I’m careful not to make any sudden movements as I loop my arm over the thick plank of wood.

Sutton doesn’t seem the least surprised to hear me, which confirms my suspicion that he knew I was here. Even though he doesn’t take his eyes from the horse, his attention encompasses the whole of the paddock. The whole of the land. It encompasses me.

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Who says I was talking to the horse?”

That surprises a laugh out of me. Always this man can surprise me, beguile me. Tease me into wanting something I’ve told myself would never work. “How long have you had her?”

“A few months,” he says, taking another few steps to the side, coming an inch away from touching her before moving away. “But I’ve only just started taking her out. She had abrasions on her legs when I got her, and a lung infection that hadn’t been treated.”

Unease moves through my stomach as I look at the beautiful animal. She’s dangerous and strong… and healthy. It hurts to imagine her as anything else. And underneath the rebelliousness I sense the dark tinge of fear.

“Someone hurt her?”

“They neglected her,” he says, his voice flat. “Which is the same thing when she needs to be taken care of. A friend of mine found her in a stall with someone he was doing business with. Bought her because he couldn’t stand to see the conditions she was living in. Almost put her down before he thought to call me.”

Steel squeezes my heart. “Put her down?”

Sutton takes another few steps, passing close enough to touch her but choosing not to. The horse snorts her protest but doesn’t move away from him. It strikes me that this is a dance, the athleticism and grace unmistakable, purpose imbued into his every movement.

“It takes quite a bit of money to take care of a horse. Especially one who already has health problems. One who will still need to be broken.”

His matter-of-fact tone takes my breath away. Does he think about people that way, too? Does he think about *me* that way? “Is that how you see her?”

“Of course not. That’s why—”

The pounding of my heart fills my ears. “With a dollar sign over her head? And if her medicine costs more than that, what’s the point of keeping her alive? She’s disposable anyway.”

Sutton walks toward me, and suddenly I’m backing away. The safety I had felt on the other side of the fence evaporates beneath his piercing blue eyes. He ducks between the horizontal slats, coming toward me, making me back away until I finally remember to stand my ground. Then we’re face-to-face, and I’m confronted with the sheer size of him. In the paddock it had been theoretical, more like artwork to be admired. Standing in front of me, he breathes and moves with potent hunger. More than something to be wanted, he’s someone who *wants.*

“That’s not how I see her,” he says, his tone gentle.

“I’m sorry,” I say, breathless. “Of course you don’t. You’re taking care of her.”

“She has a home here. Even if she never lets me ride.”

“Okay,” I say, my chest tight.

His eyes pierce my armor, seeing the secret fear I’ve worked hard to protect. That I’m only a series of numbers preceded by a dollar sign. That I’m a living, breathing line-item entry in a spreadsheet, no matter how much I pretend to be worth more than that.

“I’m surprised you’re even speaking to me,” he says, his gaze turning dark. He looks at my lips for a moment. “Figured you’d be pissed about the price tag for the library.”

“I thought you weren’t part of the company anymore.”

“Resigned my position, which means I didn’t have a say. But I still owned my share of the company and profited from the deal that Bardot made with you.”

“It was his decision to be an asshole. I just wish I hadn’t played into his hand.”

“Then why are you still doing it?” The words are soft, but they fall like bullets.

“I’m not.”

“You think he doesn’t want you back in Tanglewood? Back in the library?”

“He doesn’t care what I do.” I’m doing this for my mother, because I will do almost anything for her. Except for meet with the person from the hospice to help make her Death Plan. The name makes me shiver. *Hurt and hurt and hurt, and then die.* We don’t need a plan.

We need a time machine.

A quiet laugh. “Christopher Bardot is far from indifferent. He’s developing the luxury condominiums right next to the library, and guess who lives on the top floor?”

I stare at him, disbelieving. But even while my mind refuses to accept this, my body turns warm. “Whatever happens next to the library isn’t my problem. I’m only concerned with restoring it. Will you help me? It’s important for the city.”

And no one else will take the job.

Every construction company I’ve tried has told me to tear down the building and start again. The words *not structurally sound* have been used more than once. If I were smart, I would actually listen to them, but I’m the queen of lost causes.

Sutton looks away, toward the land. “I can’t say no to you, but it isn’t for the good of the damned city. And it’s not even for Christopher Bardot. Not anymore.”

“Why would you have done it for Christopher?”

He smiles without humor. “Why indeed?”

I take a step toward him, close enough that I have to look up to meet the sky blue of his eyes. “You never did tell me why you went into business with him.”

“My reasons don’t matter.”

That’s the only warning before his head lowers, before his lips touch mine. Warm. Insistent. He kisses me the way the sun shines on the land, certain of its welcome. My body opens toward him in instinctive surrender, pleasure washing over me in waves.

As quickly as he claimed me, he's gone again. He steps back, leaving a cool breeze between us. There's nothing sensual or intimate in his expression.

I touch my lips as if I can hold some of his warmth there. I told myself I wasn't interested in dating, but I can't deny that I want this intimacy. It feels like breathing after being so long underwater. It feels like air. His blue eyes track the movement, hungry, belying the air of indifference in his stance.

"You stopped," I say, a little relieved, mostly sad. "Because I kissed Christopher?"

"That was a wake-up call for me, but no. I'm not angry with you, if that's what you're asking. You can kiss whoever you want. And I'm the last person to judge you."

"Then why—"

"I'll restore the library because you asked me to. Like I said, my reasons don't really matter. But I can't be with you, Harper. Not like before. I can't go there again."

My stomach lurches. I would have said I already knew that. That I'm not looking to be with any man, but the rejection hurts all the same. "Before, when you courted me."

A slight nod.

That was the word he used. Courted. It only stopped when he found Christopher kissing me. And me kissing him back. Sutton may claim not to be angry about it, but what other reason could there be for him pulling back? Why else would he have left?

"That's good," I manage to say. And I almost mean it.

I've always been the girl every boy chased. The one who could always walk away.

I *needed* to be that girl so that I could keep myself safe, so that I would never end up desperate and alone and scared like my mother. Then two men made me fall for them. Hard. They both walked away at the same time. And look, I could handle the hit to my pride. I can pull up my big girl panties to deal with the humiliation of that.

It's the blows they dealt to my heart that left me broken. Shattered. I'm like a cartoon statue that's been hammered. There's a crack at the impact. The crack spreads into a thousand fractures, until I'm made of a million pieces. There's a moment in the show when I'm frozen in air that way, and

that's how I've been living these past six months—the pieces suspended, waiting to fall. There's no way to avoid it; the killing blow already happened.

For a moment he looks bereft. "Good," he repeats.

It breaks my heart a little, that this handsome, virile, charming man would doubt himself. That I ever let him think I wanted Christopher instead of him. "You were enough for me, Sutton. You were enough for anyone."

He gives a slight shake of his head as if waking from a dream. "It doesn't matter. There's nothing between us except the library now. Nothing holding us together anymore."

It makes me wonder what had held us together before. Attraction? Chemistry? We'd had those in spades, but I remember the wry tone when he'd said, *I'm the last person to judge you.* It makes me wonder if it had been Christopher binding us together all along.

"There's something I should tell you. The library…" My breath catches. "It's more than a restoration. More than rebuilding the front wall. It's in bad shape. I think the wrecking ball made the building weaker, in places we can't even see."

He studies me. "Are you saying you think I can't save it?"

We aren't only talking about the library. "I'm asking you to try."

"And if it can't be saved?"

The thought sucks the air out of my body, leaving me hollow and thin. There are only two things I've fought for—my mother's life and the library. It's only a matter of time before I lose the first one. I can't bear to lose the other one, too. It would break me.

Some of my despair must show on my face, because Sutton's jaw clenches. "How bad are we talking, Harper?"

"You aren't my first stop. I asked every construction company in Tanglewood to look at the library. None of them would even bid on it. They said it has to be destroyed."

I'M EXPECTING A construction crew complete with cranes and drills and whatever else they use to fix old libraries. Instead it's just Sutton driving a

black Explorer, pulling up in the small parking lot between the library and the wasteland that is the west side of the city.

He tells me he has to take a look at the building before he can call a crew and give them information, so I wander through the shelves while he pokes around in the back rooms and climbs into the attic. He comes out smelling of dust and mothballs.

"So what do you think?" I know I must look too hopeful. I sound too hopeful, like someone who doesn't see that the building is literally falling down around us. It might be asking for a miracle, but when you're staring death in the face, that's what you need.

He looks up at the broken stained-glass window. "Harper."

"I mean I know it's kind of a mess." A strange little laugh escapes me. "It's actually missing the whole front wall. And there's all this rubble everywhere. I'm sure we can sweep that up."

Blue eyes darken. "Harper."

"And then there's the whole foundation issues. I'm not saying it will be easy."

"I need you to tell me why. Why do you want to do this?"

"Why *don't* I want to do this, that should be the question. Because it will be amazing for the community. Did you notice all the buildings falling down around us? The crime rate around here is… well, you know, it's bad. Books are the answer to that, Sutton."

A long pause and then with exasperation he says, "*Harper.*"

"Okay." I close my eyes tight. "Okay. I'll tell you. But I don't even fully understand it myself. I just know that there are only two things I care about —my mother and this library. I can't lose both of them." I already lost my father. I already lost Christopher and Sutton. People leave, but I can at least save the building. I can at least have smooth wood and concrete.

He looks away again, this time toward the wall. "Even if I agree to take on this project, even if I try to save the building, you understand there's a chance it won't work. Hell, we shouldn't even be standing here without support beams and hard hats. This whole thing could come crashing down on our heads."

I can't help my squeal of delight. "So you'll take the job!"

"I didn't say that."

That makes me hop around and clap. “You’re totally going to do it. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You don’t know how much this means to me.”

He looks grim. “I think I actually might.”

I stretch up on my toes and kiss his cheek. “I knew I could count on you. Everyone was like, no one would be crazy enough to take on this project.” I use my best asshole-contractor voice. “And I was like, you know who’d be crazy enough?”

“Sutton Mayfair.”

“That’s right, Sutton Mayfair.”

He turns serious. “How’s your mother?”

My stomach knots the way it always does when I think of her. “They say she has six months to live. I don’t understand how they calculate that. A hundred and eighty days.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather spend the time with her? The library will be here when you’re ready to work on it. You don’t have to do this now.”

There’s a shudder, and then a rain of dusty concrete falls on us. Sutton pushes me under the circular library desk. The feel of his hands on something so innocuous as my arms, and suddenly I’m flashing back to the time he bent me over the desk. So much has changed since then. I thought I might be able to save my mother with impossible treatments.

I still had hope.

I’m not sure the library really would be here in six months, if we didn’t do this now. The building is dying. My mother is dying. There’s only one hundred and eighty days left.

“I’m not going to be the one drilling holes in the floors,” I say softly. “That will be you and whoever you’re working with. I only want to save the wall. If I can do that, if I can fix that terrible crack with my own two hands __”

I break off and stare at my hands, the nails cracked from the woodwork I’ve been testing out. My palms rough and calloused from years of painting. These are not delicate hands.

“I have to do something,” I whisper, and it’s like a confessional under that circular desk. “I have to fix something, and I think I might be the one running out of time.”

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CHAPTER FIVE

BLACKBALLED

THERE'S AN ENIGMA among painters. Let's say an artist studies and practices for twenty-five years of her life. Then she spends two hours painting a masterpiece. So did it take her two hours to create it? Or twenty-five years?

I don't know the answer to that, but I do know that sculpting a wall three stories high would take my entire life. There are splinters in my palm, open cuts on my fingers, and a deep purple bruise on my thumb caused by a rogue mallet. The block of oak looks more like a child's forgotten pile of Play-Doh than the angular bison I'm trying to re-create.

A pigeon flies across the open space, landing on an old green dust-covered lamp. The whole building seems to shift and sigh, as if its alive. As if it's hurting.

Sutton spent the past week with structural engineers and contractors who told him the same thing they told me—the library is broken beyond repair. While it stands now, the essence of the building is too weak to hold forever. And once construction begins, with its banging and its jostling, the whole thing might come down. It's a hazard. An accident waiting to happen.

Which is why I didn't tell Sutton that I was coming today.

He drove to his ranch today to work with Gold Rush. That's the name of the white-beige horse with fear and defiance in her eyes. If he's gone too long, he would lose her trust. That's what he told me last night when he called. He also told me that the library is a hopeless cause.

I study the grain of the wood, the way it fought the trowel.

There are woodworkers more qualified than me. Really any of them are more qualified than me. I've done basic sculpture as part of my degree and even used small wood pieces in some of my mixed media work. Nothing on this scale, but I can't give up the project. Even as much as I trust Sutton to

save the building, as much as I hope he actually will, the wall has to be mine.

Maybe it's becoming an obsession.

As much of an obsession as the shiny mall had been to Christopher.

"What are you doing here?"

I turn back to see him stepping through the plastic sheeting, his eyes black with fury. It's like I've conjured him from my mind. He can't be real. Can't. Be. Even as he kicks aside pieces of debris and storms closer, even as the dust parts for him like the goddamn Red Sea, I'm sure he's part of my imagination. I must have inhaled more varnish than I thought.

He grasps my arms, both of them, hauling me up. I gasp at the sudden movement. The trowel I was holding clatters to the floor. Those black eyes sear me, accusatory and cold.

"I said, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Rumpelstiltskin," is all I can manage to say, which makes me sound crazy.

Christopher Bardot has always had that effect on me. From the time I was fifteen years old, he made me stutter and stumble. But he doesn't disappear when I say his name.

Instead he looks incredulous. "This building should be condemned."

I yank away from him, only able to breathe again when he's no longer touching me. "This building is none of your concern. Not after you sold it to me. For a ridiculous price, I should mention."

"It's my concern if it crashes to the ground next to *my* luxury condos."

"Oh no." I manage a laugh that sounds haughty and unafraid. As if I'm not shaking inside. "Sutton told me you're still developing in the west end. I'll stay out of your business if you stay out of mine."

His lips press together. It's as if the words are torn from him. As if each one pulls a piece of his skin when he speaks it. "When did you speak to Sutton?"

"When I hired him to restore the library."

"Restore. *Restore?* It's not a goddamn painting in a museum. It's a building that isn't structurally sound. There's no way you can get a contractor to work on it."

My eyes narrow. "Wait a second. Did you *talk* to contractors about this building?"

“Of course I talked to them,” he says, his voice clipped. “I owned it.”

“You bastard.”

“The only thing to do is raze the building and start over.”

“You *bastard.* You blackballed me. Told the contractors not to do business with me. What did you offer them? Some of the money I paid for the library? God. You are unbelievable.”

“They’re welcome to accept any job they find suitable.”

“That’s the only reason you sold it to me, isn’t it? Because you knew I wouldn’t be able to restore it.” For two billion dollars. He sold me the library knowing I couldn’t fix it.

“You can rebuild. Make it look exactly like it did before, if you want.”

“It won’t be the same.”

“You’re damn right it won’t be the same. It will be structurally sound.”

“Well, the joke is on you, because Sutton already said he would help me. And in case you didn’t notice? People actually like him. They *want* to work with him, because he’s not an arrogant jerk face.”

Christopher looks around with fake curiosity. “Then where are the workers?”

“They’re coming,” I say through gritted teeth. There is a ball of fire inside me. It’s an entire sun, its rays struggling to find a path out of my body. He doesn’t give a fuck about me. About the library. So why is he so damn intent on ruining this?

“And in the meantime, you’re… what? Living here?”

“So what if I am? Maybe I camp out under the circulation desk with a sleeping bag. Maybe I use the antique books as kindling for more fire and eat roasted pigeons for dinner.”

“What about your mother?” He says it as a challenge, which only serves to piss me off.

“What do you care about her? You didn’t want her to have the treatment, and now she’s not having it. The hospital doesn’t get their expensive new butterfly garden. Happy now?”

“It’s not safe here,” he says flatly.

“Then why don’t you leave?”

He turns away from me, and for a moment I think I’m going to see the back of him. It feels momentous, that his broad shoulders might walk away from me one last time. I don’t know what my life would be like without his

hard disdain. Without his censure. I long for the freedom as much as I ache for him to stay. One step. Two. He makes it six feet away before he stops.

I need him to hold me. To tell me everything will be okay.

"There's no way I can convince you to go?" He asks the question without looking at me.

He does worry about me, in that terrible white-knight kind of way. Terrible because it's how he keeps his distance. Like I'm someone he has to save instead of a woman he can hold. There's no life raft in this particular ocean, though. There's no saving me.

"Why did you come here?" I ask instead of answering.

Then he does face me. "I always come here. I can't seem to stop. It's the reason I bought this building, the reason why I planned to revitalize the west side."

"If you love the carving, why did you want to tear it down?"

A slight smile. "It's a bad habit of mine, destroying the things I love."

The word *love* coming from his mouth falls on me like a ton of bricks. The library walls falling on top of me couldn't hurt this much. My lungs burn from lack of air. Christopher Bardot has never loved anything. He's controlled and owned and protected—but never loved. Has he? He never cared about anything beyond ambition. Beyond money.

"Please," he murmurs, gentle as if he can sense my turmoil.

And Christopher Bardot has definitely never begged.

"I'm done for today," I say, my voice uneven. It's hard to breathe in the face of this new side of him, still protective, still controlling, but somehow more real. Less like a stylized carving. More like a man who hurts and feels and wants. It makes me want to wrap myself in his arms, but what if he turns back into stone?

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CHAPTER SIX

WORTH DOING WELL

I MET AVERY at Smith College, where she was the quintessential good student and I had a reputation as a wild child. It was easier to explain how I didn't know about a universal family tradition because I had been stuck in an Austrian boarding school. Easier to act unaffected by the infamy of my dysfunctional trust fund by pretending to obsess over parties and frat boys and reckless stunts.

It would be easier to really be as self-absorbed as people thought I was, but I felt every whisper, every criticism, every cruel smile directed at me as if my skin were made of paper.

I pull my leased BMW into the wide circular drive as the electronic gates swing open. Around back there's an eight-car garage with empty bays for Rolls-Royces and Aston Martins, the kind of cars befitting a house like this. I would have bought them, too, if Mom cared anything for cars.

Or if she could go anywhere.

"Helloooo," I call into the wide marble-floor foyer, hearing my voice echo back to me.

There's only silence.

I didn't feel guilty about the incident with that statue and the campus police. Those kinds of things were hobbies. Or maybe defense mechanisms. I didn't have the paralyzing doubt and self-recrimination I have now, when I dread coming home every evening.

Upstairs I find my mother napping even though it's already almost bedtime. She looks peaceful on her side, her hands resting one on top of the other. There would be no sign that she was unwell to someone who didn't know her. The main difference is her weight, something she's fought to keep down her entire life. Now she can't eat enough to even maintain her weight.

That’s what the cancer does, takes all the nutrients away so her own cells starve.

It’s her eyes that look the most different. There are dark shadows underneath her lashes. I can see the blue-green veins in her eyelids. They look sunken, especially when she opens them and smiles.

“There you are,” she says, her voice rusty with sleep.

I brush her hair back, the way she did when I was a little girl. “Here I am. And I brought takeout.”

She scrunches her nose. That’s another side effect of the cancer. She doesn’t even want to eat, when really her body needs even more calories. “I ate a big lunch.”

“Well, you can have a little fried rice. And some sweet and sour chicken.”

A disapproving sound. “There’s some quinoa and kale salad in the fridge.”

“I also got some fried wontons,” I say in a singsong voice because no one can resist fried wontons—not even my mother. She’s into whole grains and organic fruit, but they weren’t enough to save her. Not even the herbalist or the acupuncture made a dent in the cancer.

She sits up, looking like some sleeping beauty awakened with a kiss. The irony is that if she’d done the rounds of chemo and experimental treatments that the doctor prescribed, she would look much worse. Her hair would be gone, her skin might be bruised.

And the cancer might have been held back, if only for a few years.

I fought with her to do the treatments. Begged her. In the end it wasn’t truly Christopher who kept her from having them. I had to accept that she didn’t want that. That she wanted to live out what was left of her life with whatever peace she could find. This house is part of that peace. The fried wontons are part of that peace. But God, it hurts to watch it happen. It hurts bad enough that I dread coming home, and that’s when I feel guilty.

“How’s the library coming?”

She knows about the issues with contractors, though I haven’t told her quite how dangerous it is for me to work on the restoration with the current structural problems. And I have no plans to tell her about Christopher Bardot, who’s still a tender spot considering he left her destitute after taking the helm of my inheritance. I should not want a man who did that. I never

should have been able to love him, in the deepest, most secret part of my heart. “The last shipment of oak looks really good. A close match. I’m going to stain it and see how it holds up. The bigger problem is my own skill with the chisel.”

“You’ll figure it out. I have faith in you.”

I make a face. “Are you sure I shouldn’t hire someone? I talked to Professor Basu over e-mail, and she said there’s a really promising woodworking artist who graduated last year.”

She sits up, moving slowly because I know she gets dizzy sometimes. “I’m sure you’ll do the right thing.”

That’s what she says when I’m thinking about doing the *wrong* thing. “The wall is worth doing well, even if I have to find someone else to do it.”

“Someone else who understands your vision?”

That’s the part that kept me from e-mailing Professor Basu back to ask for this guy’s contact information. There’s skill and there’s passion. Both are required to do this wall. I don’t have much skill in this medium, despite having graduated in studio art, but I don’t trust anyone else to have the passion. The wall speaks to me, and with my clumsy hands I’m speaking back.

Mom stands up and then slides back to the bed. I catch her under her elbows, pulling her to standing. “Are you okay?” I breathe even though the answer is clearly no.

She’s not okay. She’s dying. That’s what this house is—a personal hospice.

A place to say goodbye.

Her slender hand cups my cheek. “You’re so strong,” she whispers.

“I’m not,” I whisper back because even now I want to fight her. I want to beg her to do some kind of therapy, even though I know we passed the point of no return. There’s only death now, and waiting for it is killing me.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

BUSINESS PARTNERS

I KNOW SOMETHING is different as I hopscotch over rubble.

A sharp mechanical sound cuts through the hum of male voices. The heavy plastic sheeting that protects the library from the elements is my very own looking glass. As I step through it, I find a whole bevy of strange creatures, muscled men with tools and boots, as if they stepped from the wall and became flesh.

They spare me a few glances, a little curious, mostly wary, before going about their work. It's almost noon, and though I only got up and showered an hour ago, the sheen of sweat on their brows tells me they've been at this a long time. They have hard hats on their heads and smudges on their dark shirts.

"Harper." The low voice makes me jolt.

I turn to face Sutton, who looks more like the old version of himself, the one I first met, wearing black slacks and a white button-down, the sleeves rolled up to reveal golden hair on his forearms. He isn't covered in smudges or sweat, but he does have a yellow hard hat on, burnished curls peeking out from beneath it.

My heart thumps a warm welcome for those forearms. "What are you doing here?"

"Restoring the library." He raises an eyebrow. "Like you asked me to."

"Well yeah, but I thought you couldn't find a construction crew willing to work on the library. And these people seem like they know what they're doing. Not like you found them on Craigslist."

"Thanks," he says drily. "They do know what they're doing, and I didn't find them on Craigslist. You don't need to worry about the library. How's your mother feeling?"

Guilt clenches my insides, along with worry and fear and a terrible grief that she's slipping through my fingers. I can't catch her. It's like reaching for smoke. "She's doing okay. How do you know she's in town?"

He lifts his shoulder in a vague shrug, which I assume means I wouldn't like his methods. A worker appears at his side to show him a paper. He scans it quickly, his blue eyes sharp, before nodding. The man hurries away to the next room where the books are kept.

"So what did you have to offer them?" I ask.

He steers me by my elbow away from the workers, his touch a delicate burn. "It occurred to me how strange it was for no one to take the job. Tanglewood isn't exactly in a construction boom right now, which is partly why we wanted to revitalize the west side."

"Christopher," I say grimly.

Blue eyes turn speculative. "How did you know that?"

I don't really want to tell him that Christopher was here last night—or that I was here, alone. "An educated guess. He's always been the meddling type."

"Meddling. That's one word for it. He hinted that they would get a big contract with his high-rise condos if they refused a renovation. It was rebuild or nothing, he told them."

"That bastard," I say faintly, hurt anew to hear it spelled out.

"Unfortunately he hinted that to every construction company. Once I convinced them of that, I had three bids on the table and more on the way if I waited for them to get their shit together."

"And you picked the lowest one?"

"Nope, I didn't go with any of those bids. Instead I brought in a company from Louisiana. Cost a pretty penny to transport the equipment and house the workers temporarily, but it's the principle of the thing. I'm sure you understand."

"That sounds like something Christopher would do."

A faint smile. "There's a reason we went into business together. If I'd let one of them take the job, they'd think they could get away with that next time. We deal honestly or not at all."

"Maybe Christopher was worried about our safety. About the safety of restoring the building now that the foundation has been compromised." The

words ring false even as I say them, but admitting that Christopher screwed me over that completely still hurts.

Sutton gives me a droll look. “He’s only worried about himself. It bothers him when the puppets don’t dance on his strings.”

There’s a fist around my throat, making it hard to breathe. “You’re probably right.”

“Speaking of safety, I couldn’t help but notice some loose carvings near the back. The wood is almost the same color, but they didn’t come from the wall.”

My cheeks heat. “Oh, I did a little work.”

He takes off his hard hat with a knowing look and places it gently on my head. “You shouldn’t be here without me. You shouldn’t be here at all until the building is stabilized.”

The yellow hard hat looked like a normal size on him, but it feels like an umbrella on my head, like I’m a little girl playing dress up. I peer up at him from beneath the brim. “This thing is heavy. How do you work with this on?”

“Only have to get hit with a falling chunk of concrete once before the hard hat looks appealing.”

“There weren’t any falling chunks of concrete last night, I promise.”

He frowns. “But if there had been, if you had been injured, there would have been no one to help.”

“That’s not *quite* true.” As soon as the words are out, I wish I could take them back. From the suspicion in Sutton’s blue eyes he already knows what I have to say next. “Christopher came by.”

He curses softly. “Of course he did. One of the construction companies probably gave him hell when I turned down their bid, which serves him right. God*damn* him.”

Something warm and mysterious moves inside me, responding to the anger Sutton feels for Christopher. It’s almost intimate, this fury. More like betrayal than a dissolved business partnership. It makes me wonder if they ever shared another woman. “Was it only me between you two?” I ask, hesitant. “Am I the only reason you resigned?”

A raised eyebrow. “Are you feeling guilty?”

“You’re both big boys. I’m sure you can make your own decisions. I’m just curious.”

He sighs, rubbing his hand at the back of his neck. “There was always some competition between us, but I’m pretty sure you could guess that. We’re both ambitious.”

“It’s what helped you work well together,” I guessed.

“It’s what broke us apart in the end. You were part of it. Most of it, maybe. The physical side of it, but Bardot and Mayfair wouldn’t have lasted even if you never came to town.”

I have the sense of something beneath the surface, of watching a shadow move beneath a seemingly placid lake. “Why wouldn’t the company have lasted?”

“Because it wasn’t about the money,” he says, his frustration almost tangible.

I hold my breath because I’ve wanted to hear those words forever. Wanted them to be real. Wanted something that wasn’t about the money—but Sutton isn’t talking about me right now. He’s talking about Christopher Bardot while his deep inner turmoil vibrates through the air around us.

“What was it about?” I whisper, knowing he won’t answer me.

The closed look on his face reminds me of Christopher. He can be just as cold and ruthless, even with his handsome golden-boy features, even with his easy charm. “It doesn’t matter,” he says finally. “The company is over. Dissolved after the library was purchased and the assets distributed.”

I take a step closer, needing to know the answer. Feeling it at the tips of my fingers. Reaching for it. “Come to dinner with me, Sutton. We can go to L’Etoile again.”

And we can fall on each other in a hallway. He can lift my couture skirt and make me see stars. It doesn’t matter what restaurant we go to. That’s how the night would end.

His blue eyes turn dark. I don’t mistake the desire. “We’re business partners. That’s it.”

“The way you and Christopher were business partners?”

Something flashes across his face. “Yes,” he says. “Like that.”

“Then we can meet where you met him. At the Den, for cognac or whiskey or whatever the hell rich men like to drink these days. We work together now. You don’t have an excuse.”

There’s every chance tonight will end the same way.

He stares me down, willing me to look away first. Except I want this too much. I want *him* too much, in all his conflicted glory, even if he is some kind of consolation prize. Even if that's what I am for him. He courted me once, and he was damn charming then. But now he's resisting me, trying to be reserved, and he's damn near devastating.

I might be the one falling to my knees in front of him tonight.

"Beer," he says, his voice rough. "At the Den. Nine o'clock."

I take off the yellow hard hat and hold it out to him. "You need this more than me. I don't want any wayward pieces of concrete knocking you out. I'm pretty sure they don't serve beer in the ER."

He gives me a small smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes.

I'm still wondering about that look as I step back through the heavy plastic sheeting, as I cross back through the looking glass into the real world of traffic horns and exhaust.

The way you and Christopher were business partners? There was something in his expression when I asked the question. Guilt. Longing?

It makes me wonder if there was more to their relationship than money. It makes me wonder if I broke more than their company when I stood between them.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

NATURAL PART OF LIFE

MY MOTHER'S NURSE is a stout woman with perpetually pink cheeks and a tendency to call everyone *sugar.* Freida dutifully prepares the chopped kale salads and wheatgrass smoothies my mother prefers, but I suspect she laces the brownies with pot.

Whatever we're paying the agency, it isn't enough.

I like her so much I can almost forget that she isn't a regular nurse. She's a hospice nurse, part of a whole hospice team that consulted with my mother for weeks when we moved here.

Daddy died in the middle of my first art gallery show, to the shock of everyone.

What came after, the will and its humiliation, that was a surprise, too.

My mother seems determined to die in exactly the opposite way—slowly, with every stage planned out. I'm sure it comes from a kindness, a wish to prevent the kind of paralysis that gripped us in that New York City hotel room, the air still tinged with the smell of paint.

Freida manages to corner me. I'm usually more careful than this, but I sneaked into the kitchen for a pot brownie and a glass of milk. I could have used a little natural high before seeing Sutton in his natural element. There's nothing behind me except a walk-in pantry, no possible escape from the conversation I've been avoiding for almost a month.

"Harper," she says. "I'm glad I caught you, sugar."

I wave the plate with the pot brownie vaguely, as if I'm not panicking inside. "Oh, you know, just getting a midnight snack. It's something I do when I'm sleepwalking. Like right now."

She gives me that hospice-nurse smile. "We should talk about your mother."

“You already told me what she ate today,” I say as if she’s just so silly. As if there’s nothing else to say about a woman determined to die in the most drawn-out possible way.

“We should talk about the Death Plan, Harper.”

And there it is.

I still can’t believe there’s something even called a Death Plan. Who plans for death? It’s the worst possible outcome, and even if it’s inevitable, even if you see it coming, how can you accept it with something as terrible as Times New Roman printed on cheap inkjet paper?

“I really don’t think I need to talk about it, actually. Bad enough that it exists.”

She doesn’t move out of my way. “The purpose is to make the event easier for you.”

“Easier? Death isn’t supposed to be easy.”

“Maybe not easy, but it doesn’t have to be hard. Death is a natural part of life.”

God. Is that what the Death Plan says? Ten thousand percent glad I haven’t read it. “I know Mom was into this whole hospice, kumbaya, circle-of-life thing, and I respect that, but that doesn’t mean I have to join the club. No leather jacket for me, okay?”

“She would really like you to be on the same page.”

No, it’s not respecting her wishes, but I can’t read that sheet of paper any more than I can stab my eyes with a steak knife. That’s actually looking more and more like a reasonable exit as Freida continues to stand in front of the door to the kitchen.

It may not look like much, but I’m doing the best I can. I’m not fighting for my mother to continue treatment. I’m not begging doctors for favors or circling the world for a new experimental medicine. I’m here to face her death, but I don’t have to read the script.

“You can’t avoid this forever,” she says gently.

“Watch me.”

It strikes me how this is the opposite of Daddy’s death. His will was a secret when he died, taking all of us by surprise. Maybe even him. Instead there’s an actual plan for Mom’s death. There won’t be any surprises, any pain, because dying is just a part of life, right? Unless the paper says, *Just kidding, I’m not dying,* there’s nothing that can make this easier.

The nurse takes a step back, giving me enough room to squeeze by. “My job isn’t only to care for the dying. I’m here to help the family, too.”

I stare at her, more bemused than frustrated. “Does that ever actually work?”

She pauses for only a moment. “I hope so.”

And I think I’m not the only woman trying to turn straw into gold. I’m not the only woman failing. There are a million impossible tasks we give ourselves, trapped in a room with no way out. Part of me wants to throw my arms around Freida and sob into her warmth. Instead I leave the brownie on the counter and go upstairs to change into something sexy and ill-advised. It’s going to take something a lot stronger to make me forget tonight.

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CHAPTER NINE

SELF DESTRUCT

THE DEN IS part gentleman's club, where socializing happens with liquor and cigars. Part Renaissance salon, where ideas are discussed. And part boardroom, where deals are made.

Both Sutton and Christopher are regulars here, which means I put on my best dress. Even Mom notices the effort, telling me I'll turn heads tonight. I might not be with either man right now, but I can at least show them what they're missing. Tonight I need something that shallow. Something that selfish. Something that sweet.

Tonight that means a strapless red gown that flares into an asymmetrical sweep beside my knee. It's head-turning anywhere, but in the low lamp glow of the Den I'm like a walking, talking beacon to the men around me. There are a hundred eyes on my body as I weave around crinkled leather chairs and thick wood stools.

The first person I recognize is Blue, a man I've met here before who runs a security company. He's standing at the bar, watching the men who watch me. There's definitely no Sutton, no lazy smile as he waits for me and that drink. Unease curls through my stomach. Did he stand me up?

"Whatever's on tap," I tell the bartender, sliding across a twenty.

An assortment of gold and clear liquids line mirrored shelves behind the bar, but I find myself craving the cool froth of a beer. Maybe it was hearing Sutton say the word, that it somehow eroticized an otherwise ordinary drink. He has that effect on more than beverages—the heat of morning across my cheeks, the metal scent of the earth.

All of it becomes the backdrop to his elemental charisma.

A large glass of amber beer appears in front of me, the glass already condensing.

Blue slides the bill back to me. “It’s on me. The least I can do considering I earned many times that spying on you. What makes you so intriguing, Ms. St. Claire?”

So that’s how Christopher knew about my mother. “I’m sure I have no idea. It must be really boring to watch me read books and pick up Thai food.”

“I don’t watch you personally, but I see the reports.”

That makes me snort. “‘She ordered the yellow curry today instead of the red.’”

“Interesting enough that I can sell it to more than one entity.”

That must mean Sutton is paying for information, too. And why not? Both he and Christopher are friends with Blue Eastman. That’s how I met him. It doesn’t have to bother me that they’re both nosy and manipulative. It doesn’t have to hurt.

The ache in my heart proves me wrong.

My gaze scans the room back and forth, back and forth. Only when my heart leaps do I realize I’m not looking for sky-blue eyes and blond hair. Not only that. I’m keeping an eye out for Christopher, unable to keep myself from hoping. That will go on my tombstone, I’m sure of it—*here lies Harper St. Claire, unable to keep herself from hoping*.

“Shouldn’t you be at home changing diapers?” I ask.

Blue nods toward a closed velvet curtain. “I would, but I’m on the clock. We have two clients in the game. They both have their own bodyguards, but I figured I’d better check in.”

“The game?”

“Poker,” he clarifies.

“Does that often get violent?”

“All the men around the table are armed.” At my shudder he adds, “Not everyone who works for me can get the cushy job of tailing little girls to the library.”

I scrunch my nose. “I’m not a little girl. And I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“That’s good because he’s not there to guard you. Look at it this way—at least if the building comes down on you, there will be someone to dial 9-1-1.”

“He won’t come in after me?”

A faint smile. “He has orders not to engage.”

“Cold,” I say, but I can’t help laughing. “At least show me pictures.”

He looks only too glad to pull out his phone. A quick swipe reveals a chubby-cheeked baby with her eyes closed tight, tucked into the arms of a woman I recognize as Blue’s young wife. “She’s twelve weeks.”

“She’s so beautiful, both of them.”

He scrolls to the left, where a wide-eyed toddler offers a biscuit to the infant. Another one where a large golden dog sniffs the baby, who wears footie pajamas. Then there’s a little girl with chestnut curls riding a pony, wearing a tiara and rainbow leggings.

“Three of them?” I ask, raising my eyebrows.

“And they’re all as beautiful as their mother.” He keeps scrolling through an endless display of familial love, and I soak it up. Until another swipe reveals a woman who must be his wife. They’re in a fancy restaurant with china and wineglasses between them. Date night? She’s looking up, a little shy, a mild reproach, as if he’s snapping a picture against her wishes.

“She *is* beautiful,” I admit, my voice solemn. “What did she see in you?”

He gives me a secret smile. “I didn’t give her much choice.”

The words might be ominous if I hadn’t seen such love glowing from the dark eyes in the photo. “A husband who actually wants to stay with his wife. A little strange where I come from.”

Blue tucks his phone back in his pocket. “And where is it that you come from?”

“I’m surprised that’s not in your fancy reports.” It probably is, but I humor him anyway. “I suppose you could say I come from all over the place. All over the country. All over the world. But mostly you could say I come from money.”

He nods. “That’s a whole different ball game.”

I take in his tailored suit, which molds to his large body perfectly. The watch that easily rivals something the fancy businessmen in the Den are wearing. “I think you play that game just fine.”

“It helps when you’re so damn entertaining you have half the Tanglewood population paying for information about you. If you get any more interesting, I’ll be able to buy a vacation home.”

On that note he gives me a small salute and walks toward the velvet curtains. I slip inside after him, pretending I have every right to be here. It

takes a second to adjust to the dim light and smoke in the air. Then I see players sitting around the table and someone dressed in a white dress shirt and a maroon vest that must be the dealer.

There's Damon Scott, leaning back like a king in his three-piece suit, which is a reasonable analogy considering he owns the Den. His fingers drum against cards facedown on the table.

Beside him is a man I don't recognize, with deeply tanned skin and dark hair in wild disarray, his eyes a striking green. A man who can only be a bodyguard stands beside him, filling out his suit almost to bursting, his jaw hard-set. As I watch, Blue joins him and murmurs something.

Then there's Christopher Bardot, who scans the cards he holds with pure calculation. I don't really know what counting cards entails, but I'm sure he's doing it. Not as part of any trick, but because his analytical, highly intelligent brain can't help but solve the equation on the velvet table.

He looks up, his black eyes widening in surprise. "Harper," he says, his voice low. Somehow intimate even as we sit in a roomful of people.

On the other side of the table are more men I don't recognize, one young and determined, the other weathered and shrewd, both with a smaller pile of chips. A bodyguard stands behind a gorgeous woman with dark hair who has a large pile of chips.

And then there's Sutton, sitting directly across from Christopher. He leans back, deceptively casual in his seat. He doesn't look like a man about to meet me for a drink. I think he would have spent the whole night in here.

From across the room he catches my gaze. His blue eyes are wide as the sky above Gold Rush, leading me toward a horizon I'll never reach. He looks at me with both desire and determination, as if he's pushing me away. As if he wants me to choose Christopher. I'm about two seconds away from breaking completely, and these men are playing games. It makes me want to hurt him, even if it means hurting myself.

Sutton watches me with opaque blue eyes, his expression unreadable. It isn't exactly welcoming, but I feel my body open to him anyway. To the warmth he emanates like a goddamn sun. One step, two. My hips sway to a rhythm only I can hear, and I feel some of my old confidence return. This is the Harper St. Claire wanted by every frat boy—and some of the sorority girls, too. This is the Harper St. Claire who owns the room.

This is Harper St. Claire, pressing the self-destruct button.

I'll break into a million pieces, but I'll take them all with me.

I don't bother with anything so mundane as permission. I don't wait for him to welcome me. Instead I throw myself into his lap, and he doesn't miss a beat.

As if my body is made to fall. As if his is made to catch me.

Up close I can see the glint of bristle on his jaw, the tired lines under his eyes. Why is he playing a high-stakes game when he's tired? A surge of affection takes me by surprise. Lust is something I understand. With a man built like him it's only natural. I run my fingers through his golden hair, yanking a little before I let him go.

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "You want to play, Harper?"

There's a pull deep inside my body, an answering *yes* that comes from the memory of how it can be between us. Hot. Intense. Devastating. "I'm just here to watch."

A small smile. "Then watch."

The words sound unbearably erotic, as if I'm going to watch something more intimate than a high-stakes poker game. I turn slightly in Sutton's lap so that I can see the table. And his cards. I touch them with my forefinger, affecting a surprised look. "Hey, there's one of these on the table!"

Sounds of muffled amusement come from around the table. The man with dark tousled hair gives a bark of laughter. "Watch your woman, Mayfair," he says with a curl of his lip.

"She doesn't belong to him," Christopher says, his voice sharp.

Something flashes through his onyx eyes, something I've never seen there—violence. It's cold and calculating, everything I know him to be. And terribly serious. I'm not sure whether he's mad that the stranger's words implied ownership—or that he said I belonged to Sutton instead of him.

An uneasy silence descends on the table, which makes me flutter my eyelashes at the stranger. "I'm sorry, I don't think we've been introduced. I'm Harper. Harper St. Claire."

"Ms. St. Claire," the man says with a look I suppose some women would find charming. It reminds me of a snake, the way it studies you before striking. "Your reputation precedes you."

Sutton tenses. The words would be a compliment to a man. They're the worst kind of insult to a woman. "You want to be careful," he says softly,

mirroring the earlier warning.

The man grins, looking like the dictionary entry for *reckless*. “I meant her artwork, of course. And her social causes. What was it you wanted to free? A post office?”

Asshole. “It was a library. And you are?”

He manages a small, mocking bow while remaining seated. “Victor Emmanuel, Prince of Piedmont. At your service, of course.”

“A prince.” I give a wide-eyed look. “Is that like Prince Harry? Are you going to marry a commoner? Oh, I do love a royal wedding.”

That earns me a lazy smile. “I suppose I haven’t met the right woman.”

The statement could be considered flirting if he hadn’t basically just called me a slut in a roomful of people. Does he think he could get away with that because he’s minor royalty? I can feel Christopher’s anger in the air, feel Sutton’s tension beneath me. From the corner of my eyes I see Blue and his bodyguards stiffen, as if preparing for a fight to break out.

What was it Blue said? All the men around the table are armed. Oh God.

“We’re here to play cards,” Damon says, gently chiding. He runs the Den and makes plenty of money off these games. I suppose it wouldn’t help to have bloodshed. He tosses his cards in. “And I’m out.”

“That’s probably for the best,” I tell him in my innocent voice. I glance at Sutton’s hand again. “His cards are really good. I mean *really* good.”

Damon only smirks back at me, probably seeing right through the act. Because Sutton’s hand really is good, but it’s not the one pair that I implied when I first sat down. No, he’s got a flush with a queen high. And I’m playing this clueless act to get someone to stay in, thinking they can beat him when they can’t.

Victor the Asshole Prince, that’s what I’m going to call him. He winks at me before tossing in a thousand-dollar marker. “Raise,” he says pleasantly.

Christopher’s eyes sear me from across the table. I know for sure he sees through my ruse, which means he knows that Sutton’s cards must be actually good. Then he narrows his gaze on my hip, where I feel the warmth of a large hand, where the calluses must surely catch on the silk of my dress. My whole body seems to turn inside out, as if I’m naked for the table. He tosses his cards into the pile. “Fold.”

The last of the players hem and haw over the increased amount, but in the end they stack up hundred-dollar chips and push them into the pile, where they topple over.

I clap my hands. “Your turn.”

Sutton’s breath is warm against my cheek. “Dangerous,” he murmurs.

Maybe he means the Asshole Prince, who’s bound to be angry that he’s just lost a thousand dollars—more counting his ante and earlier bids. Or maybe he means the dance that’s happening between our bodies, the push and pull, the sensual conversation that doesn’t need a word.

I’m the one who picks up two chips that say *$500* on them and tosses them on the pile. Then I flip over his cards and point at them idly, letting my fingers trail over the diamonds that match the ones faceup on the table. “This is called something, right?”

Damon gives a low laugh. “It’s called playing poker, darling. And you do it well.”

Asshole Prince swears rather creatively, which is the most interesting thing he’s said since I got here. He tosses his cards onto the table, revealing three of a kind. Not bad. The other players throw their cards on the table. A pair of kings—lame. And a low straight which isn’t bad but still isn’t enough to win.

Christopher doesn’t crack a smile, but I feel his amusement. It burns as hot as Sutton’s body beneath me, behind me, around me—making me feel like I’m being embraced from all sides.

I clap and bounce on Sutton’s lap, making him grunt. “Oooh, you won all these chips?”

As I stand up to pull the chips toward me, I dip low enough to show my cleavage. There are many nice cleavages in the world, but this one is mine. And I don’t mind showing Asshole Prince what he’s missing. Except it isn’t the wild, reckless eyes I meet, but Christopher’s calculating ones. He saw right through my little ruse. And as I pull back the chips, I have the strange sensation that he’s seeing right through me.

I sit back down with a sudden thump, and Sutton’s hands grasp my hips hard enough to make me gasp. There’s something else hard down there; an erection that presses against my dress. Oh God, I’d shoved my ass into his face when I gathered the chips. I make neat little piles with them, focusing

hard so that I don’t have to look at Christopher or acknowledge the arousal of the man holding me.

Asshole Prince stands and places his hands flat on the table, and it feels like he’s looming over me even though there’s a table between us and three armed bodyguards around us. “You must think you’re clever, little girl?”

“I think she’s clever,” Damon Scott says, sounding amused.

“She does like to watch,” Asshole Prince says, mischief entering his dark eyes. “She lines up the little matchstick men and then lights us on fire.”

“That’s poetic,” I say archly. “If a little gruesome.”

“I’m sure we’ll meet again,” he says, giving me a real bow this time. “For now I’m afraid I must take my chips and my bruised ego and live to play another day.”

His departure seems to signal the end of the game. The other players leave, including Damon, who says in a drawl that we can use the room for as long as we like. It makes me wonder how many dirty things have happened in this velvet-curtained space.

Then it’s only Christopher and Sutton. And me.

This is the part where I’m supposed to stand up and walk away. This is the part where I prove to these men—and to myself—that I can be the girl I was before. That I didn’t shatter into a million pieces, suspended in the air, about to fall.

Instead I whisper, “I don’t want to go home.”

It’s an admission. A confession to the two men who can most use it against me. There is no home for me anymore. There’s only hospice and Death Plan and the longest goodbye.

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CHAPTER TEN

ONE PERCENTER

SUTTON KNOWS WHAT the problem is immediately. I can sense it in the way he embraces me, the way it turns from seductive to comforting, the way he seems to almost let me go. “Harper,” he says gently. “You’re so strong. It’s okay to need a break.”

“I want more than a break,” I say, full of grim, self-recriminating guilt.

It takes me twenty minutes with my eyes squeezed tight, building myself to act normal, act natural, before I can even walk into a room with her. And another twenty minutes muffling my tears into a pillow after I leave. I need one night with these men, because I know they can distract me. Even if they break my heart afterward.

He turns my hand over and threads his fingers through mine. “You can lean on us.”

Christopher leans back across the table. “Lean on us?”

“Yes,” Sutton says, his voice lower now. “We can help her through this.”

“I’m planning on it.” Christopher gives me a dark stare. “She didn’t come here looking for a shoulder to cry on. For that she would have gone to her friends.”

Sutton gives a mocking laugh. “As if you know anything about friendship.”

“I don’t.” A shrug. “But she didn’t wear *that* dress to talk.”

A stroke down my side, over the smooth red silk of my dress. Sutton must feel that I’m not wearing a bra. Or panties. He must sense the truth in Christopher’s words. Even if I told myself I only wanted to talk to Sutton, my body knew the truth. I came here to forget.

“Is that true?” Sutton murmurs against my neck, soft enough so only I can hear. “Do you want this? Because if you don’t, I can make him leave. I

can take you home. Whatever you need."

"What if I don't know what that is?" I whisper.

Christopher stands with an animal grace. "Pretend you don't want this, if it helps. That goes for the both of you. I'll be the villain in this story."

Every muscle in my body pulls taut as Christopher rounds the table. Sutton holds me tighter, almost painfully. I know he'd protect me if I wanted him to. I could probably cause a fistfight right now, and there's a kind of power in that. Except maybe Christopher is right.

Maybe I want the power taken away from me tonight.

"Her wrists," Christopher says, all lazy command. "Hold them."

Sutton shifts like he might protest, like he might object to holding me in bondage, or maybe he'd only mind Christopher being the one to call the shots. Last time there were three of us in a room like this, it had been Sutton who gave the orders. Sutton who taunted the other man. He'd held me much like this, standing instead of sitting, my body between them, but he had been the one to give orders.

Large hands close around my wrists, and my eyelids flutter closed. A small sound escapes me, maybe from nerves, maybe relief. I'm already on display on Sutton's lap. Having my hands behind my back makes it worse. My breasts push against the silk, the folds of my red skirt spilling over Sutton's black slacks, a startling contrast. I have to pull my arms, only a little, to see if I can get away.

"You like this?" Sutton murmurs. "I know you can feel me. You like making me so hard for you? You love having two men panting after you?"

They're not really panting, though.

Christopher looks at me the same way he looked at the poker table. Like he's counting all the cards, effortless, almost clinical. And Sutton makes me feel small and delicate the way he holds me so gently, using only one percent of the muscle mass in his body to keep me still.

"She loves it," Christopher says, his voice hard as a diamond.

Sutton moves my wrists to his left hand, freeing his right to smooth across my hip. Down my thigh. Between my legs. There are miles of fabric between him and my sex, but it burns up into nothing. It's as if those calloused hands are brushing right over my clit, the way it feels. His hand looks rough and dark against the expensive silk.

“Where do you want it?” he asks, cupping me through the dress. “Here?”

“Oh God,” I mumble, barely resisting the urge to push into his hand.

Two laughs, masculine and goddamn confident. They know exactly what they’re doing to me. Christopher takes a step closer, so he’s standing only a foot away. Close enough that I can see the rumple in his dress shirt, the invisible scar at the top of his lip. Close enough that I can smell him, the spice and maleness. And arousal. I’m not sure if arousal has a smell, but if it does, we’re awash in it. We’re an ocean of desire, the three of us.

The silk gathers around my breasts in complicated folds. Christopher runs the back of his hand down my front, making it simple. My nipples turn hard and aching. Then he slips one finger beneath the neckline. He’s only touching an extra inch of skin, one inch that isn’t showing, but it feels momentous. Like crossing the Rubicon.

He adds another finger, brushing the skin at my collarbone back and forth. He can’t quite reach my nipple like this, and my body tightens everywhere, as if I can make him touch me by will alone.

“Let me look at her,” Christopher says, and I’m not sure exactly what he means until I feel Sutton’s knuckles against my back, until I hear the rasp of the delicate zipper.

The bodice falls away from my body, leaving a shadow.

Christopher tugs the dress away from me, revealing my upthrust breasts, my pink nipples. His swift intake of breath is a small comfort. This is affecting him as much as me.

“Are you okay?” Sutton asks, and it’s more than a question. It’s an escape. That’s what he’s offering me. All I have to do is say the word and he’ll zip up my dress. He’ll probably drive me home.

Christopher lifts my chin, forcing me to meet his dark gaze. “What do you want?”

It’s the same question, wrapped in different packaging.

What do I want? I want to go back in time, before I ever met Sutton or Christopher. I want to be the kind of woman who doesn’t fall in love. I want the world to be a place where men don’t leave and mothers don’t die, but I can’t say those things. They aren’t the kind of sexy answers that make sense when two handsome men are surrounding you, their bodies taut with desire. They used to be partners, these men. Not anymore.

“Both of you,” I manage to say, my voice a wisp of smoke.

That earns me a smile, a cruel kind of smile. “Then spread your legs for Sutton. He’s going to finger fuck you while I play with your tits.”

The words come harsh enough that I expect Sutton to balk. Except his cock pulses beneath my ass. His hand tightens around my wrists. And I have the sudden awareness that he likes Christopher being in charge—not only of me, but of both of us. That maybe his taunting control in the hotel room six months ago had been an act designed to protect him, as much as my obedience is supposed to protect me.

I don’t quite spread my legs, but I don’t fight when Sutton pulls my thigh open. His large hand gathers up my skirt with steady deliberation, folds and folds of it, continents of fabric, the anticipation making me wet more than his hand could do. At least that’s how it seems. Until he touches me, the large clasp of his hand holding my sex a jolt to my system.

I gasp, fighting the hold at my wrists for a second before I subside. “You’re such an asshole,” I say, my voice breaking when Sutton slides his blunt fingertips through my wetness.

Christopher smiles. “Keep going.”

One finger inside me. Two. *Oh God.* “You bastard. You prick. You’re the worst kind of arrogant, entitled, one percenter, first-world problems, my-iPhone-is-too-slow, do-you-know-who-I-am, goddamn designer-suit-wearing asshole.”

He runs a thumb over my lips, making me shiver. “It’s going to feel so good to fuck this mouth. And what’s wrong with my suits?”

They’re beautiful. Everything about him is cold and beautiful. “I hate you.”

His thumb pushes into my mouth. “So fucking good.”

“If you want me to bite you.”

He looks unconcerned. “Do you want to fuck her?” he asks Sutton, without taking his dark gaze off my lips. “I think she’s about ready. Past ready, to be honest. Practically begging for it.”

Sutton places a kiss on the side of my neck, his tenderness a contrast to Christopher. He moves higher, his lips firm. And higher, to the sensitive space beneath my ear. His teeth gently tug my lobe. “Ask me to fuck you, sweetheart. I want to hear you say it.”

I let my head fall back to Sutton’s shoulder. “Please.”

“The words,” he says, his voice gentle but uncompromising.

“I want you to… to fuck me. Oh God. Please, Sutton.”

“Why do you want me to fuck you?” he asks, his voice terribly gentle, and in that moment I hate him as much as I hate Christopher. More, because he actually has a heart in that broad chest.

“Because I’m…” His thumb circles my clit, around and around, never hard enough to help. “I’m so turned on, and it’s hurting, and I want you. And God, I’m so empty. And I’m broken.” The honesty slips through the millions of cracks around me. “I’m barely holding it together.”

That must be what they wanted, all the pain inside me, because Sutton reaches between us to undo his pants. Christopher produces a condom for him, as if this is well coordinated. They work together to keep my hands behind my back while Sutton sheathes himself. He nudges against me, still covered by the galaxy of my dress. And then he’s pushing inside, impossibly large. Maybe it’s the angle we’re using, or the fact that it’s been six months since I was with them, but the stretch makes me gasp. My eyes prick with pain I can’t quite hide.

“Wait,” Christopher says, proving that maybe he does care.

“Fuck,” Suttons says, his voice strained. “Can’t.” He pushes deeper, making my hips jerk. His hands are like iron against my legs. “She’s so tight. Too tight. You need to help her.”

Christopher is pushing aside his clothes, revealing a cock large and throbbing. Almost painful looking, the way it’s reddened. The way it’s wet at the tip. He places the slick head against my lips. “Open.”

This isn’t the kind of help Sutton meant—or maybe it is. My eyes are wide as I stare up at him. Wide and mutinous. I’m not going to give in easy, not when it feels like I’m being split underneath.

A pinch to my nipple makes me gasp, and then his cock slides along my tongue. Oh God, I’m doing this. It’s not anything like what I imagined a blowjob would be. There’s no licking or sucking. Instead I’m immobile while his hips move him deep into my mouth, the head butting against my throat. I make a gagging sound, and he pulls back. “Jesus,” Christopher says, and it sounds like an imprecation. A prayer.

This is what I asked for, isn’t it? Begging for it, that’s what Christopher said, but I could never have imagined this. The strain of it. The fullness that laps against pain like an ocean on the shore.

In a way I did ask for this, because I wanted to forget. There was something that bothered me, but I can't possibly remember it now. It ceases to exist in the face of this raw physicality.

"Not going to last," Sutton says on a grunt.

Christopher pushes forward, and I can't help the gag reflex. He pulls out, and I feel my tongue slide along the slit of his cock as I take in air. His eyes glaze with pleasure. This is the weakest I've ever seen him, and he's mesmerizing like this. Is this how I look to them with my hands behind my back? He looks like he belongs to me, pushing back into my mouth like he can't imagine leaving.

Then he does something he's never done before. He puts his hand on Sutton's shoulder. To support himself as he struggles with the pleasure of a blowjob? A gesture of camaraderie as they fuck the same woman? I don't know what it means, but it's the most intimate thing that's happened between us.

Sutton goes rock-hard beneath me. His cock flexes. His hands tighten, and then he's groaning his release. He shouts it into my hair, against my skin, biting the place where my shoulder meets my neck.

In his climax he pinches my clit, and I'm coming, biting down on nothing because there's no cock in my mouth, clenching hard around a thick cock, feeling rivulets of my arousal slide down my thighs.

Christopher jerks himself in front of me, hard, punishing, twisting at the end until he throws his head back and comes in a warm spray across my chin, my collarbone, my dress.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

FOR THE BEST

I'M STILL PANTING when Sutton gently sets me down on the cushioned chair, the fabric still warm from his body. He straightens his clothes, his hands shaking only a little.

Christopher produces a monogrammed handkerchief from the pocket of his suit and uses it to wipe my skin clean, but I can still feel him there. I'm branded with his arousal, and with mine. "I'll get you something to drink," he says, leaving me alone with the man I was supposed to have drinks with. The man who basically stood me up and got laid for it.

Only he looks more messed up by the whole thing than me.

Those strong hands tamed a wild horse, but they don't look steady now. Sutton can't quite meet my eyes as he moves a poker chip between his fingers and knocks it against the table. For good luck? Except the game is already over.

"I can't do this," he says, his voice hoarse.

"It's already done." I'm still feeling sore and stretched from where his large cock impaled me. Feeling raw that Sutton would reject me one second after he leaves my body. He was supposed to be the man I could choose. The one who chose me. Instead he seems more shaken than Christopher about what just happened. "And it sure seemed like you enjoyed yourself."

That earns me a dark laugh. "Yes, the way an insect enjoys the silk of a spider's web."

I raise my eyebrows. "Am I the spider in this story?"

His blue gaze takes me in from head to disheveled toe. "You're the web."

"God." There's enough strength left in my body to stand. "You want to act helpless? You want to play games with a billion dollars from my trust

fund and then fuck me and then act like you're the one who's hurt? Go to hell, Sutton."

"Already there," he says, and the way his eyes burn, I believe it.

He turns and leaves me standing beside the poker table, alone in a room that was filled with men when I entered. That's how I can clear a room, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Harper St. Claire show. I collapse back into the chair and rest my head on the back. There's a hollow in my chest, but I can't even blame it on Sutton for leaving. I can't blame it on Christopher for staying. It comes from deep inside, to the place that no man can fill. The sex only numbed me for so long. Grief comes rushing back in to fill the void, acid in my throat.

Footsteps approach.

A glass of dark red wine is placed in front of me. Christopher throws back a shot of clear liquid—probably vodka. There isn't a third glass. "What about Sutton?"

Dark eyes study me. "I'm sure he can get a drink wherever he's gone."

"Shouldn't you go talk to him or something? You were partners."

"We were partners. Now we're nothing." A shrug, all the more hurtful because of how casual he seems. "You didn't expect him to stick around, did you?"

"I kind of… did. Yes." What's the etiquette for a backroom threesome?

Christopher sighs as if I'm terribly naive. "What we did here… it isn't going to last."

That makes me laugh, sharp and breathless. Because it's been a long time since I was naive. "You mean you're not going to marry me with an ironclad prenup and then divorce me in a year so that we can spend the rest of our lives hating each other? I'm shocked."

A quirk of his lips. "Not every man is your dad, Harper."

"And not every woman is your mother. Why do you think I expect anything permanent? Because I'd like someone to say goodbye after… after…"

"Sex," he says gently.

I hate the look in his eyes, almost like pity. It was better when he stared down at me like he was going to devour me. Better when he snapped and snarled at me from across the poker table. "After sex," I repeat, only a little broken. "Isn't that what normal people do?"

“I have no idea what normal people do, but I don’t think Sutton is anything near normal. Oh, he may have fooled you with that Southern boy act, but he’s as fucked-up as any of us. More.”

“You would say that,” I say, though I sense the truth of his words. The weight of them.

“I’ve seen Sutton date a lot of women. Charm them. Make them fall in love. He doesn’t stick around. At least I’m honest about it. I’ve never promised anything to a woman.”

“Never promise anything, never let them down, right?”

“Is that wrong?”

“No, it’s perfectly right.” I’m unable to hide the hurt. “Christopher Bardot, always doing the most correct thing. A-plus on your Honesty in Sexual Relations exam. The model student.”

His eyes flash at my tone. “I’m going to drive you home now.”

As if I would take a ride from him. He was burning for me only thirty minutes ago. Now he’s so cold I’m practically shivering. I would probably freeze to death by the time we got there. “No, thanks.”

“Don’t be difficult.”

“Difficult. *Difficult?* Oh, you haven’t seen difficult yet.”

“Goddamn it, Harper. Would it kill you to do what I say once in a while?”

“I might listen to you if I thought you actually gave a damn. Sutton told me what you did, keeping all the construction crews away from us.”

“That was for your own good.”

My laugh feels like acid in my throat. “Right.”

“I know you’re upset,” he says in an overly reasonable tone. “You’re under a lot of stress right now. Do you need more help at home? I can speak with the service.”

I want to set him on fire with my eyes. “Now you want to help? When my mother struggled for so long, so many years, that you could have made easier? Because it took her getting cancer before you let me control the fucking trust fund?”

He could be made of stone, this granite statue planted in front of me, eternal and unfeeling. “The money doesn’t help?”

The money… God, the money. I would burn it all to the ground.

Some speck of sanity remains inside me, because I know that wouldn't help anyone. "No, the money doesn't help when cancer cells are eating her alive, when they're starving her from the inside, and she refuses medical treatment."

He looks at me with his onyx eyes, and I think he might actually say something human. Something like the Christopher Bardot I met years ago on my father's yacht. It would devastate me, to see kindness from him. It would give me hope.

A lift of his shoulder. "It's probably for the best."

"For the best? It's for the best that she isn't letting the doctors help her. They have new treatments, advances in medicine." My voice rises, and I know I sound crazy. I *feel* crazy. Maybe it was foolish to expect kindness from this man, but this coldness is a new level. "How can her dying be for the best? Tell me that, Christopher."

"Better that she goes sooner than prolong it."

He should not be able to shock me. I know every dark angle inside Christopher Bardot. I know better than to expect anything like compassion from him, but God, I'm stunned. My mouth is open. No words come out. There's only silence for an endless moment.

"I hate you," I whisper. And it's not a sexy blowjob kind of hate.

It's a bone-deep grief.

I don't want wine, but I take a sip anyway, letting the acid wash away any lingering taste of him. The first sob takes me by surprise. It's loud, filling a room made for excess and pleasure. The second one I capture with my hands, shaking with the force of it. Sorrow isn't a quiet thing; it's an earthquake inside me. It takes over until I'm breaking apart, sitting still, trying to catch my tears and failing.

Someone appears in front of me. A large hand on my shoulder.

Then I'm wrapped in strong arms and lifted.

It could be anyone taking me anywhere. Christopher taking me home—finally, finally. That terrible prince taking me to the depths of hell, for all I know, but I press my face into the broad chest. The linen becomes soaked immediately, cold against my skin from tears that are hot on my cheeks. One long sob that I can feel in the base of my throat, and I suck in air, breathing in the earthy scent of Sutton.

Thick night air. The smell of exhaust. The muted sound of a car door, and then I’m in the back of a limo, still ensconced in Sutton’s arms. He doesn’t try to stop me from crying.

“You left,” I finally manage to say, my voice heavy with tears. Drenched with them.

He holds me a little tighter. “I came back.”

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CHAPTER TWELVE

MILK AND COOKIES

FREIDA IS KIND enough to pretend like it's ordinary to arrive home completely disheveled, my dress stained with something mysterious, my eyes red and puffy from crying. She gives me the information for the evening, what my mother ate, what she *didn't* eat, with a completely straight face—which is all the more impressive when I actually look in the mirror.

"I really have to shower first," I say with a groan. Mascara has made track marks down my cheeks. I look like a girl in a horror movie who's been running for her life and about to die. "She'll call the police if she sees me like this. You can go home now."

Sutton shakes his head. He doesn't seem himself, not quite as assured, but he looks very certain about this. "I'm staying until you go to bed."

I give him a sideways look. "You hoping for a round two?"

A faint smile. "Always."

Maybe Christopher was right about him. Maybe a hundred women have fallen in love with Sutton. I'm just one in a long line. Does that make it any less real? "Well, Freida makes a mean chicken salad. In the fridge, if you're hungry."

One thing about beautiful old houses is that they don't always have modern amenities. There's only enough hot water in the tank for a lukewarm shower, but I turn the knob all the way and stand under the spray without moving, letting it use up all the hot water in a matter of seconds. It burns my shoulders, my breasts. My skin turns pink, which is a relief. That's how I feel on the inside. Tender and hurt. The water turns cold, but I stay like that, opening my mouth and drinking some of the well water, letting it numb me from the outside.

When I get out of the shower, I still look like I've been run over by a train, my eyes red and a little shell-shocked. But I don't look like I've just

been in a gangbang, which is an improvement. I throw on a Smith College sweatshirt and a loose pair of sweats.

Then I step into the closet to take deep breaths.

Five seems like enough, but it's not until ten that I think I'm capable of hiding my grief and shock at how skinny Mom looks these days, at how weak she seems.

I half expect Sutton to be gone. Didn't he disappear when I needed him most? But I can hear his voice as I come down the stairs, low and teasing. And then my mother's voice, answering back.

It feels surreal to walk into the kitchen and see them sitting at the table. Like maybe I fell asleep in the shower and hit my head. This is all a dream, seeing my mother laugh with Sutton.

"What are you doing?" I ask, which is silly considering what they're holding.

"Gin," Sutton says, tipping his cards toward me. "And your mother is kicking my behind."

"And we're having ice cream." My mom tucks the spoon almost delicately into the carton and takes a bite. "If you ask very nice, we'll let you have some."

It takes me a moment to remind my feet to move, but I manage to cross the parquet floor to the kitchen table and take an empty seat. A glance at the cards laid out reveals that, yes, my mother is kicking Sutton's behind. Who uses that word anymore? *Behind.* It's an old-world kind of manners for him to watch his language around my mother.

"I hope you didn't bet anything on the game," I say, picking up a spare spoon.

Sutton nods toward the counter, where a glass case reveals baked goods. "That chocolate chip cookie."

I stare at him, expecting him to suddenly fly around or transform into a dragon. That's how strange it is that he got my mother to eat anything, even ice cream. How strange it is that he got her to want food at all. She's had her share of wheatgrass and barley in her life, and it hasn't helped her that much. Now I'm just thrilled to see her eating anything, to see her cheeks pink with excitement.

She puts down three aces with a little laugh. "That cookie is as good as mine."

I scoot my chair a little closer to Sutton. “You obviously need all the help you can get,” I tell him by way of explanation. He gives me a small smile, looking almost bemused.

He’s warm against my side, solid, comforting. He drops his hand to clasp mine, two of his fingers filling my palm. And I feel closer to him in this moment than I did at the Den, when he was inside me.

When my mother wins, she gets up to do a funny little jig and get the chocolate chip cookie. Which then prompts her to get milk and cookies out for everyone.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, soft so that only he can hear. I don’t only mean in this kitchen. I mean in my life. In my heart. What is he doing to me?

“Not courting you,” he murmurs.

That makes me laugh because he’s telling the truth. This is Sutton being an ordinary person, kind and genuine and so damn charming he has my mother eating cookies. If he courted me again, I don’t think I’d even survive it. He’s dangerous, this man. More dangerous than Christopher’s cruel indifference.

“The library,” I murmur. “It’s going to make it, right?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Why do you ask?”

“Because I talked to the foreman yesterday, and he said that they haven’t even applied for permits yet. Or ordered supplies. Or started—”

“They have to ascertain the condition of the building first. Better to be thorough now than have surprises later. But you shouldn’t be in the library, Harper. Not while the foundation is broken. While the foundation is shaky. It’s not safe for you to be there. Promise me.”

Safe? I’m not worried about safe. Sometimes having the roof crash down on my head actually seems appealing. A lot more appealing than a neat little Death Plan, that’s for sure.

My throat feels tight, and I have to turn away. “Harper?” he says.

I can hear the concern in his voice. He’s going to make this about me in a second, but I won’t let him. “No,” I tell him, as normal as I can. “Keep playing. Please.”

Then my mom sits down for another round, and I can turn away blindly, eyes hot with tears, lips pressed tight. I hold it together long enough to make it to my bedroom. I grab a pillow from the bed on my way to the

closet before shutting myself inside. And there, with my face pressed into the cotton, muffled to the world around me, I crack into a thousand pieces.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DEATH WISH

THE LIBRARY LOOKS like a war zone with temporary plaster columns holding up the ceiling and holes drilled into the precious mosaic floor.

I guess you really do have to break something before you can fix it.

Sutton doesn't want me here, which is why I come after hours. I can think without the jackhammers and sweaty muscled men distracting me. There's something about this broken wall that makes me ache inside, as if a living being has been injured, as if I need to sew it back together so that it can heal. But not with the butt of a buffalo or the heel of a boot.

That might be a more authentic restoration, but it's boring. And I have the sense that it would bury the wall instead of making it come alive. This library isn't going to be a museum. It will have modern books and computers for the community.

The wall should breathe with the community.

I'm doing my part by smoking a joint while I work, folding the sweet, earthy smell into the clay. I'm not sure it helps me create better, but it definitely makes me more willing to try. Which is how I end up on top of a twenty-foot ladder, holding up a piece of sculpted clay to see how it looks. The ladder wobbles for one second, and I hold my breath.

"Do you have a death wish?"

I know who it is before I look down. The electricity along my skin tells me it's Christopher before I even see his stupid beautiful suit or his dark eyes. Not to mention it's the same thing he said to me years ago when I sat on the railing of the yacht—only a few minutes before I fell into the water. "What are you doing here?"

"Keeping you from breaking your neck."

Why does he care? "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not falling."

“There’s always a second time,” he says, the grimness of his voice proving he remembers the yacht as clearly as I do. How he’d jumped in to save me. How it remained our secret to this day. It’s a kind of thread, that secret, binding us together no matter how far away he seems.

I climb down the ladder with exaggerated care, making sure I don’t even wobble, because he will use any weakness against me. And also because the world is a little spinny right now. Maybe I shouldn’t mix pot and ladders. “I’m not speaking to you.”

He might as well be the galaxy itself, unfathomable and dark. Nothing I say is going to affect him. At least that’s how it seems on the outside. “And you’re high. Christ.”

“This is my library now. You’re not welcome here.” I’m ready to tear him apart, to fight off all the arguments he’s sure to make. I’m ready to hate him, until his next words.

“What I said about your mother is unforgivable. I have no excuse for it. But I am sorry.”

All my anger collapses in on itself, a black hole. God. If he had come here self-righteous and cruel, I could have battled him until the end of time. Which just makes him a bigger asshole. “It doesn’t matter,” I tell him, which is a lie.

“It matters to me. And if you want to request that someone else manage your trust fund—”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Never having to deal with me again.”

“I never wanted to have that control. I never asked for it. Sometimes I think your father did it because he knew it would make you hate me. It was the final *fuck you*.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “I thought you looked up to my dad.”

“I can respect the man and still acknowledge he was a monumental bastard.”

“I’m familiar with the feeling,” I say drily.

“And then other times I think, maybe it wasn’t a *fuck you.* Maybe he was just that dysfunctional that he thought he was protecting you. It could have been his last gesture of care as your father.”

My throat burns. “I really think it was the first one.”

“You’re probably right.” He puts his hands into the pockets of his slacks, which somehow doesn’t make him look dejected. Instead he looks

thoughtful. “Anyway, I don’t think it’s for the best. Your mom dying.”

I swallow around a knot. “No. It’s not.”

He looks toward the front of the library where a temporary wall has been erected, more protective than the heavy layers of plastic sheeting that were there before. “I have a hard time with…”

“Being nice?”

“I was going to say death. Accepting it.”

“A hard time.” My laugh sounds hollow. “Yes, I think I have that, too. I don’t accept it. I can’t. How can anyone accept it? The end of someone you love. It’s not a thing you can accept.”

He stares at me, his dark eyes opaque, because it doesn’t matter what I say. Death doesn’t care whether I accept it or not. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“No.” I think of Sutton playing gin with my mother. I can’t imagine Christopher doing the same thing, but I’m tired of pushing people away. And that isn’t what I need from him anyway. I need something more personal. More selfish. “Maybe.”

Christopher leans over the counter and picks up a yellow construction hat. “You should be wearing one of these. This is an active construction zone.”

I groan. “Not you, too. Sutton’s always on my case.”

“It’s important, Harper.” He places it lightly on my head, and I stick out my tongue.

“How am I supposed to be creative with this thing on? It’s like a jail for my head.”

“It will keep your head in one piece.” He looks up at the wall, studying it. “Did you know they invented the hard hat around the time this was carved? Out in the Hoover Dam, you had these guys on planks of wood hanging on rope seven hundred feet off the ground.”

I shiver, looking up. The wall is only thirty feet high.

“They got tired of debris falling and hitting them in the head. Sometimes killing them. So they invented a way to steam canvas, to make it hard enough to protect them.”

“You know what’s wild? How fragile human beings are, that we actually survived this long.”

“My dad had it. Prostate cancer.”

A fist around my heart. A squeeze. “I didn’t know that.”

Or maybe I didn’t want to know that about him. Maybe I kept myself closed off to him, the way he kept himself closed off from me the night after the poker game. We’re both products of our childhoods, raised not to trust love, determined to buy it so we can see the price up front.

He leans against the library circular, crossing one foot over the other. “He fought it, you know. Doing everything the doctors told him. It was brutal. It killed him faster than the cancer would have.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, and I am. I’m desperately sorry. No one should have to watch their parent die like this. I don’t know what kind of death would be better, though. I don’t *understand* death, so maybe I’m more naive than I realized.

Or maybe death isn’t meant to be understood.

“I don’t know… maybe I thought I could spare you that, cutting off the trust fund so it couldn’t pay for that experimental treatment. I was relieved when I heard she was going to stop treatment altogether.”

My eyes close, pressing out a few tears. They’re ever present with me now. I only have to look at something she would have liked in a store, see a food she would have loved to eat before they start falling. I’m a wreck, and she’s more at peace than I’ve ever seen her.

Christopher shakes his head slowly. “Then I saw you that night. You were so lost. I would have done anything to fix that. Found a doctor from across the world. Invented a cure myself.”

I reach over the counter and touch the back of his hand. He clasps my hand, even covered with clay and dust. “Who was there for you?” I ask him. “When your father died?”

He blinks, looking uncertain. It’s a strange expression on him. Foreign. “What do you mean?”

“Who held your hand? Who let you cry?”

A long silence. “My mother… she was already distant by the time it happened. I think it was almost a relief for her. A way to leave without the shame of getting a divorce.”

I make a small sound, unable to help myself. Sympathy.

“It’s a blur to me now. And after… after, I just focused on school. That was his thing. Focus on school and get a nice safe nine-to-five job with a retirement plan.”

“He’d be proud of you,” I whisper.

Christopher looks at me sideways, his expression severe. “I’m not sure about that. I’m the asshole boss of the guys he wanted me to be, but it doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.”

“Death isn’t a place in the clouds where people smile down on us. It’s pointless, Harper. You want to know why I work so hard to make money? Because it’s the only damn thing that’s real in this life. Something to hold on to because there damn sure isn’t anything at the end.”

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE COMMON MAN

THE NEXT NIGHT when I arrive at the library there's a very tall, very sturdy metal scaffold waiting for me beside the wall. It could have been anyone who left it here. Maybe the construction foreman wanted to check something at the top of the wall. Or maybe Sutton left it for me to use. But I have a suspicion that it's Christopher.

Does that mean he's going to visit again tonight?

There's a joint in my pocket, but I don't bother to light up. I'm already buzzed, my head floating, my body hot. Christopher Bardot is a potent drug for me; I can only handle him in small doses. Anticipation slides through my veins, and I feel high before he even comes.

Something keeps me from climbing the scaffolding or getting a ladder from the equipment out back. Instead I work with the putty on the ground, keeping one eye trained on the door in case I have another late-night visitor.

It gets to be so late that I doubt he's coming, and then I have to face the hard lump of disappointment in my gut, the proof that I want the man I shouldn't.

As if the cute little dress I'm wearing tonight didn't already prove that.

It's with those disheartened eyes that I look at the putty I've been working with, surprised to find it's actually pretty good. It's a more abstract piece than I usually make—geometric shapes unfolding, like an idea being peeled away. Or maybe skin flayed open, in a purely conceptual way. That would be an interesting addition to the wall, exposing what's underneath. Not in a literal sense, because there's only shadow and studs back there, but symbolically.

What *is* behind the wall? I'm not sure I know the answer. Industry is on the surface. Muscles and iron and longing. What's underneath must be

darker. It always is. The opposite of industriousness… well, that's being stationary. Being stuck. Maybe even failure.

The opposite of longing is despair, the certainty that what you want will never come.

"It's not your usual style," comes a low voice from behind me.

Christopher steps through the archway, wearing black slacks and leather loafers, a stark contrast to the dusty disarray of the library. He's unbuttoned the top of his white dress shirt, but it still looks crisp. His jacket straight. Every black hair on his head neatly in place.

He looks around with a hard expression, as if the building's being inspected by him and failing to impress. As if he still owns the place. That makes me frown. "How did you get in through there? The doors back there are locked."

"It's possible I didn't send all the keys to the commercial realtor," he says, not sounding very remorseful. He also doesn't offer to give me the secret key, and for some reason I don't demand it. The library is about open knowledge, not locked doors, and Lord knows Christopher isn't going to vandalize anything. I'm more likely to do that than anyone else.

But I think the real reason is that I want him to come back.

"Why are you here?" I ask softly.

"To make sure you don't fall and break your neck. It's a habit of yours."

"Only when you're around. And I don't mean the library. Why are you *here*, in Tanglewood, developing the land I didn't buy from you? You could have sold it."

He shrugs. "You know me. For money. For stepping on the backs of the common man."

For the first time since I met him, his words ring false, as if he spoke a lie. As if everything else he said to me has been true. "Be careful," I whisper. "I might think you want to stay near me."

He takes a step closer, and I'm suddenly aware that my hands are caked with putty. The world of art shows is glamorous with wine and chandeliers, but the reality of creation is much more messy.

And a little more dangerous.

At one point I was so engrossed in my work, so vehement with a sculpting tool that the metal detached from the wood handle and plunged into my thumb. It bled into my dress for a while, and every time I worked

the clay after that, smoothed it over and made it ridge, the newly formed scab would break again. There are dark striations in the finished product—not red blood now, but an ominous black.

Christopher takes my hand and turns it over, pulling away the clay where it's formed a protective barrier. He makes a *tsk* sound, probably because I'm careless. Because I have a death wish. Because I don't wear a suit and move numbers around on paper all day. It makes me want to smack him, that sound; why can't I be good enough for him? *He isn't your father,* Avery said, but this sinking feeling in my stomach is exactly the same.

Except Christopher does something I don't expect, something I never would have imagined. He presses his open mouth against my thumb, his lips unexpectedly gentle, his tongue sweeping over the cut. There's clay and blood and sweat, right there against his tongue. He must taste every dream I have, every failure I fear. He must taste *me*.

His eyes close, lashes long and black against his cheek, and he moans. He moans as if I'm some sweet nectar he never imagined tasting. I've had this man's cock in my mouth, and still this is the most unabashedly sensual experience of my life. He sucks gently, the suction of his mouth on my thumb somehow reaching straight to my clit, pulling me taut, making my legs press together.

When he looks up at me again, his eyes are hooded. "You know I want you. You've always known I wanted you, and you got into so much trouble because you loved when I came after you."

My laugh feels a little shaky, like I'm walking a tightrope high above the ground, praying that I'll keep my balance long enough to reach the other side. "I don't get into trouble. Trouble gets into me. That would happen whether you were there to save me or not."

His lips quirk up. "But you do love it when I come after you."

"Is that why you're here? Am I in trouble?"

"No," he murmurs against my palm, pressing a burning kiss against my lifeline. "I thought we would try something new this time. I'm not here to save you or protect you. I'm not here to catch you when you fall. So I'd recommend not climbing anything."

That makes me laugh, though it's more an exhalation of disbelief. He has always been the white knight to my damsel in distress. It's been a gift as much as a curse, a way to keep himself near me without ever being

vulnerable. “What would you even do with me if you weren’t catching me?”

“I have some ideas,” he says in a voice like black gravel, rough and sliding. He steps close enough that I can feel his body heat against me, that I can smell the musk of a day’s work in the office, the grit and determination of him made real.

My voice comes out a whisper. “I don’t know what to do with myself if I’m not falling.”

Two fingers under my chin. He gazes down at me with fierce possession. “Catch me instead.”

There are only two seconds in which I might reclaim my sanity. Two seconds when I might remember that he’s dynamite and I’m flame. I use them to lean closer, savoring the brush of his breath against my lips. Every nerve ending in my body lights up in anticipation. His hand slides to the back of my neck, and I surrender to the certain explosion, letting my head fall back, my eyes close. His teeth sink into my bottom lip. Starbursts flare behind my eyelids.

I’ve been with Christopher a million times in my imagination. If I had a dollar for every time he pressed his lean body over mine… I’d be rich with it, swimming in money.

The times with Sutton should have been the real thing.

They should have been reality, but this, *this* feels brand-new.

He doesn’t kiss me; that would be too easy for a man like this. He’s made of sharp edges, and he uses them to leave a mark. He bites at my mouth like someone long starved, made violent with it. Strong fingers grasp my hair. The groan he makes sinks into me—a barbed-wire sound. I’m pinned from all sides by him, panting in his hold, whimpering so he knows I don’t want him to let go.

It only seems to inflame him; he walks forward, forcing me back against the scaffolding, cold metal bars crossing my back. It’s too much, too much, and I take a swipe at his lips with my teeth.

Only then does he gentle. It’s like he was waiting for me to fight back, like that’s what he needed all along. Maybe that’s what he meant when he said *save me*; maybe I have to hurt him to do it.

I pull at his white dress shirt, his jacket, but he’s made too solid to move. The only way to reach him is through my mouth, and I nip at him

wherever I can reach—his lips, his chin, the angle of his jaw. He sucks in a breath, but it doesn't sound like pain. It sounds like someone who's felt something too good, and he backs up that impression by pushing his hips against me. There's an outline there, unmistakable. Hot and hard against my belly. Sutton is large, but Christopher is made of steel—not just in his cock, but his abs, his arms. Everywhere I can reach, he's forged with fire.

Except for his throat. There the skin is tender, almost velvet, with a late-night bristle that burns my cheek. I slip my tongue out to taste him; he's elemental earth. He vibrates at the slickness, tilting his head back so I can reach better. I move down, down, down in defiance, pressing my lips to the hollow at the base, feeling his heartbeat move through him.

"Please," he says, and he sounds so lost. He sounds like I feel most of the time. I never imagined that Christopher Bardot would bare the most vulnerable part of his body.

Never imagined that he would beg.

This is someone always in command, the smartest man in the room, the most determined. And when he cedes control to me, power rushes through my veins. I can do anything if this man needs me.

Anything except decide what to do next. Despite the wildness of our threesome in the Den, despite Sutton's creativity, I'm not really that experienced when it comes to sex. I don't really know what *normal* sex looks like, and I'm pretty sure that's not what Christopher would want anyway.

He solves the problem by pulling away long enough to yank off his jacket. He lays it down over the dusty floor, ruining the expensive fabric. "For your knees," he says, and I remember the salt-sweet taste of his cock in my mouth. I drop down, too eager, but then he's beside me. Under me.

And I realize that none of Sutton's creativity prepared me for this—for Christopher lying flat on the bits of rubble, only half-shielded by his jacket. For my knees on either side of his head, padded by his jacket, the pale peach cotton of my dress spread out over him. It's only shock that has me reeling back, only shock that has me gasping, "No. Wait. Don't."

Even so I'm not expecting him to actually stop, to push my skirt away long enough to ask in hard, explicit terms, "You don't want me to lick your cunt?"

My hips react in a visceral way to the word *cunt*; they rock forward as if asking for his tongue, needing it. Sutton pressed me up against a wall and held me there. Christopher ordered me onto Sutton's cock and fucked my mouth. There's a certain amount of helplessness I can pretend in those situations—I didn't know his mouth would make me orgasm. I couldn't predict his lap would have a stiff cock pointing up.

And even if those kinds of nonexcuses only work in my head, I didn't realize how much I was relying on them before now. Before now when I have to place my body over Christopher's face and lower my sex to his mouth. There's too much action involved, too much knowledge.

I can't, I can't, at least until he says, "I've been dreaming about this. Since that night I held you naked in the cabin. I knew I shouldn't think about you that way. I had just pulled you out of the goddamn water, but it was all I wanted. I dreamed about you waking up and kneeling down on top of me. I dreamed about how you would taste—salty from the bay, sweet from your sex. I'd lick you and lick you until you were dripping down my face, until I was slippery with you, and then you'd come, riding me hard enough I'd barely be able to breathe, and I'd reach down and grip my cock. That's all it would take. I'd just hold myself and come while you moaned my name above me."

"I want that too," I breathe. None of my imaginary sex dreams prepared me for this, but every nerve ending has come awake. There's an ache between my legs, and I'm afraid he's ruined me. Something in me cracked when I heard him speak just now, and the only way I'll ever be assuaged will be with a mouth under my spread legs while I rock my hips just how I want it.

Only, I would have thought I'd have more power on top like this. His hands grasp my ass, somehow covering almost all of it, even though there should really be too much. He holds enough to mold my movements, to rock me to his beat instead of mine. It's too fast at first, and I gasp above him. I don't even have any balance, and I'm forced to hold on to the bars of the scaffolding that shoots up around us. The old rusty wheels complain at the pressure, but they hold still, locked into place.

He licks me through the cotton, but it does nothing to disguise the feel of him. It only seems to make it sharper, the wet fabric pressing into my

folds, into my clit. All I can do is hold on as he searches for something that makes me squirm.

And then he bites me, teeth only slightly blunted through the cotton, right on my clit, and I scream a little, making birds fly up from somewhere in the library where they shouldn't be. His hands pull me toward him again and again, there's no escaping the sun-blinding pleasure, and then I'm coming, a mess of slick arousal sounding slippery against his lips.

Christopher doesn't reach down to grasp his cock, even though I moan his name. Instead he flips me over so I'm on the ground looking up at the crack in the wall. A zipper. A tear. And then he's above me, inside me, my legs spread so wide I'm almost bent in half. His face looks carved into sharp angles, his eyes hard black stone. Everything about this is too much. "I should be high for this," I gasp, and I expect him to tell me that I shouldn't be, not ever, it isn't safe, isn't legal.

"Later," is all he manages to say, and it rings through my body like a bell. Keeping time, that bell. A promise that I'll hear it again, and I arch my body up in gratitude.

His cock pushes deeper, and I have to squirm away from the fullness.

He seems to think I'm hurting, because he murmurs, "I'm sorry." One hand curves beneath my neck, the other beneath the small of my back. He's holding me up away from the ground even as he fucks me into it, shielding me even as he tears me apart.

I'm not expecting to come again, but then he shifts his hips. He hits some new angle, and my hands fly up above my head. It's like I'm falling, even though I'm already at the bottom. My hand finds one pole of the scaffold, and I hold on tight. Pleasure rises inside me, sharp and sudden. Christopher quickens in three hard thrusts, and then he's holding me so tight I can't breathe, my climax taking me just as swiftly. I'm held suspended in the air by his embrace, floating beneath the shaky scaffold and the broken wall. It's as if the whole building shudders when we come. There's dust in my eyes. Dust, dust. That's why they burn.

I'M NOT SURE what I expected after sex beneath the scaffolding. Maybe that Christopher would disappear into the shadows, making me wonder if it was just a dream. Or maybe he'd say something mean about how rich girls don't have feelings and I'd have to awkwardly flounce out of the building that I own, like that disaster of a dinner at Koi.

Instead he puts my clothing back to rights with careful determination. His expression remains grave even as his fingers brush my bare skin. Then he stands.

His shirt looks a little rumpled, his hair askew, but otherwise he doesn't look like he just had sex. And he definitely doesn't look like someone just came while sitting on his face.

"Come on," he says, holding out his hand.

I narrow my eyes, untrusting. "Where are we going?"

"To my lair," he says, his voice sardonic. "Where I'm going to have my way with you."

When Christopher Bardot argues with me he's attractive, but when he does this dry humor he's downright irresistible. Somehow my cheeks are warm. "Haven't you already done that?"

A dark gaze runs over my dress, leaving goose bumps in its wake. A heartbeat remains between my legs, an insistent throb where his cock has been. "Not nearly enough."

"Lead the way," I manage to say lightly, as if this is all a big joke. I have a lot of practice with that—pretending that life is a joke instead of tragic. "I've always wanted to see your lair."

A light mist kisses my face when we step outside. My dress doesn't warm me nearly as well as the jeans and T-shirt I usually wear. Cool night air slides up my legs, and I shiver in the black parking lot.

"Cold?" he asks, but he doesn't wait for an answer. The jacket that had been slung over his arm drapes over my shoulders suffusing me with the scent of earth and sex and something purely Christopher. It should probably repel me, but I find myself drawing the material tighter around me.

He takes my hand again as we cross the parking lot, and even in the black of night I can't help feeling safe. It reminds me of sinking, sinking into the ocean. And Christopher diving in to save me. It created an unbreakable line between whatever neuron in my brain between him and safety. When I'm scared I think of him—and how he would protect me.

When I’m happy I wish he were with me to experience it, too. If it were anyone else I would have called this feeling love, but I don’t understand how my heart can betray me with someone who so clearly doesn’t love me back.

We cross the slippery gravel of the library’s parking lot and a cracked street. Then we’re standing in front of a half-built building that looks like it was transplanted out of upscale downtown. Frosted windows do nothing to obscure the marble floors inside or the wide bank of elevators.

“Is this what your half of the library built?” I ask, to remind myself that he only wants to use me. For money. For sex. Sometimes those are the same things, anyways.

It doesn’t mean he has feelings for me.

“Construction has been underway since you left,” he says, in a matter-of-fact voice. “My share of the money is sitting in a bank account. What do you think I should spend it on?”

I think of the way the scaffolding seemed to tremble with the aftershocks of our orgasms. The way the building seems to breathe harder every day, struggling to stay upright. All that money to house books, because knowledge is the only thing that has a chance in hell of saving the west side. I look around at the dilapidated buildings on either side, the way they seem to slouch beside the monument to commercial success between them. “Books,” I say simply.

He gives me an enigmatic smile. “Maybe then I’ll finally learn.”

Sliding glass doors silently open as we approach. I raise my eyebrow. “You have it open.”

A nod toward a black sphere jutting from the metal frame. “Facial recognition.”

“That’s not a little big brother-ish?”

“Big brother is the government. This is a privately owned building, which means we can be as intrusive as we want. Do you have something to hide?”

“Everything,” I say. “Most of it from myself.”

He presses the button for an elevator, and the doors slide open. “After you,” he says, a wave of his arm gesturing me inside. It feels a little like a spider speaking to the fly, but I step inside the elevator and we’re both whisked higher and higher, the lighted buttons rising.

The doors open directly onto the roof, the concrete almost unearthly pristine white. Not enough rain or dirt or time has stained this place, its white floor and short walls and exposed silver pipes. This high it feels like the stars are dangling in front of me, like I can reach out and touch them with my forefinger.

"Oh my God," I say, taking in the view of the city. "It's lovely." Downtown might as well be the next galaxy. And around us there are a hundred thousand pieces of debris orbiting the building. It seems impossible that we can ever get enough inertia to even leave, much less turn this place into a bustling center of commerce. It's both beautiful and heartbreaking, a combination I'm all too familiar with.

"Yes," he says, sounding distracted. "Lovely."

When I glance at him he turns away from me. "Thought you might as well see what you're fighting for."

A lump forms in my throat. "You mean what I'm fighting against."

I know that libraries help communities. That art can save lives. I believe in the power of them both, but looking at the wasteland that is the west side of Tanglewood it's hard to believe that anything can help.

"Why did you decide to build here?"

"You know why. Cheap real estate. A monopoly on the market."

Selfish reasons, but they don't quite ring true. Not anymore. "Is that all?"

He points toward the library. From this angle the broken stained glass dome at the top looks like a gaping hole where the heart used to be. "You can see the cracks in the foundation from here. Look at the height of this side of the building. And then the other side."

My heart thumps a scared little sound. "Only a little bit."

"I've looked out the windows here for six months. I've seen the whole building shudder and shiver and end up one centimeter more uneven."

"That's why I have a construction crew. They're going to fix it."

"They're not," he says, sounding almost sad. "Nothing can fix the building."

"But Sutton said—"

"Sutton Mayfair would risk your goddamn neck just to get back at me. Don't believe a damn word he says to you. You need to be in a hard hat

before you're anywhere near that building. And I don't see why you should be near it at all."

"You don't own the library anymore, and you never owned me. With that attitude no wonder you aren't with someone. Women don't like being ordered around."

"You seemed to like it at the poker game," he says, his voice low.

A flush climbs my cheeks. At the poker game I felt used in a decadent, purely sexual way—but the sex we had under the scaffold was different. It felt like I was the one using Christopher's body, controlling him, *breaking* him like a beautiful stallion.

God, no wonder Sutton wanted Christopher. He knew what it could be like.

"Maybe I like ordering you around." My voice comes out low and liquid, a form of seduction I didn't know I was capable of until I see Christopher's eyes darken. "Does a powerful woman turn you on?"

He studies me with those inky black eyes. "Yes," he says, but though that word reveals so much, it still feels like he's holding even more inside. Like I'd have to pry him open to find out all his secrets. I'm a little afraid of what I'd find if I did.

"Do you think it would have been different?" I ask, a little wistful. "That kiss in the art gallery. Do you think we would have really dated if my father hadn't written you into the will?"

He stares at me, his eyes stormy, no sense of stillness now. "Dated? You think I would have dated you and then… what? We would have had an argument about working long hours or being jealous or whatever the fuck normal people fight about?"

"I don't know," I whisper, a strange sense of longing tightening my throat.

It would have been nice to find out.

"We wouldn't have dated," he informs me, his voice rim. "I would have claimed you. And what's more you would have claimed me. There wouldn't have been an end. You want to know if it would be different? Day and night, that's how different it would be."

This way is night, dark and a little scary. He doesn't have to spell that part out for me to recognize that truth. "Why did we let Daddy mess it up?"

"We were young. And I was stupid."

“You aren’t young anymore.” And he’s a long way from stupid.

He gives me a private smile, as if he knows a secret. “No, not anymore.”

It sounds like a promise, those words. As if he’s going to fix what’s been broken for so long, but some things are damaged right down to their core. Some things can’t ever be put back together. The library looks up at us, its windows shattered and boarded, its walls caving in.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE DANGERS OF CORPORATE EXCESS

I BURN MY hand pulling a tray out of the oven. Metal heated to four hundred degrees burned right through the cute dish towel I found at a boutique that says, *My safeword is takeout.*

"Shit!" I suck on my thumb with a plaintive sound.

Avery gives me a completely unsympathetic snort. "I'll do it."

She uses an oven mitt—a plain, utilitarian blue oven mitt that seems to protect her just fine, because she manages to put the tray on the stove without almost dropping it.

"I bow to your greatness, Martha Stewart," I say, handing her a serving spoon.

We spent the afternoon carving pumpkins. Avery made a traditional jack-o-lantern face. I applied my Smith College art school education to sculpting a penis out of a large orange fruit. And then we cleaned off the seeds, added plenty of butter and salt, and roasted them to perfection. My mouth is watering just looking at them, all browned and glistening.

When we've got the pumpkin seeds in a bowl, we join my mother on the sofa, where she's got the TV queued up to the title screen of *An Affair to Remember.* "Ready, girls?"

"I've never seen this one," Avery says.

"That's blasphemy," my mother says. "This is the most romantic movie."

I go for a cluster of pumpkin seeds and pop it into my mouth. It burns my tongue. Then the salt and flavor hit me all at once. *Orgasmic.* "I've seen this a million times. And sometimes she'll replay the scene at the end, the one where he sees her in the theater."

Mom's eyes get all dreamy. "And then he goes to her apartment."

“‘I was looking up,’” I say in my best Deborah Kerr impression. Avery gives me a bemused smile. “You’ll understand in about two hours. And you’ll never look at the Empire State Building the same way. In fact it’s almost like the movie is a statement on the dangers of corporate excess.”

“Oh hush,” Mom says, pressing play. “It’s pure romance.”

The three of us gorge ourselves on butter-coated pumpkin seeds, licking our fingers to get all the salt. Cary Grant and Deborah fall in love on their cruise, even though they’re engaged to other people. *Pure romance,* my mother said. And it’s true. This is one of the most romantic movies ever made, except for the woman Cary Grant’s character didn’t marry. The man Deborah’s character didn’t marry. Strange, how love makes everything understandable. Even if it breaks someone else’s heart.

We reach the middle of the movie when I realize my mother’s fallen asleep, her head tilted to the side, the blueish veins visible in her eyelids. A knot in my throat, I pull up a blanket around her waist.

“Should I stop the movie?” Avery whispers.

I shake my head, but it’s not really an answer. Part of me wants to shake her, to demand she stay awake long enough to watch her favorite few minutes of her favorite movie. She’s been sleeping more and more, sleeping in late, taking naps.

The nurse told me it would happen.

Frieda also told me to consider a hospice facility, because this is one of many signs that my mother is dying. Her lack of appetite. The bruises that appear on her body even when she didn’t fall down. The way she sometimes wakes up without knowing where she is.

A hospice isn’t going to make that better. No, I should be the one who reminds her gently where she is. I should be the one who coaxes my mother to eat, who sits in vigil beside her while she sleeps.

I take her hand in mine, feeling how terribly cold it is. Unnaturally cold. That’s another sign from the nurse. Fevers and drops in temperature that come and go. *How long?* I asked her, but the nurse, so full of information, hadn’t wanted to answer that. It could be anywhere from a week to six months. *Then you don’t really know.* That’s what I wanted to scream at her. Instead I just thanked her with tears in my eyes, stupid, useless tears.

Avery hits the pause button on the remote and comes to kneel in front of us. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Is there anything I can do?”

“She’ll probably sleep for a couple hours,” I say, shaking my head.

A small smile. “I mean for you.”

That makes me laugh, a watery, strangled sound. “I don’t know.”

Avery takes my other hand, holding it as gently as I’m holding my mother’s hand. We remain linked like that, a chain of solidarity against an enemy that none of us can fight. And maybe that is what I need. Someone to sit here, quiet and still, not asking for anything.

Dark falls around the house, taking away the purple glow. “You should get home,” I murmur, my voice rusty as if I’ve been crying, but I haven’t been, not tonight. It’s like my body feels it the same way, even the times when I can hold in the tears.

“I can stay in a guest room,” Avery says, her hazel eyes troubled.

“Is Gabriel home?” I’m asking about more than his travel arrangements. I’m asking about whether he still feels distant to her. If she needs a place to stay as much as I need her to be here.

She bites her lip. “He had to extend his China trip.”

“Oh. Then by all means, stay in the guest room. We can watch the grand finale tomorrow morning over French toast, which is maybe the only thing that tastes better than roasted pumpkin seeds.”

“Do you think…”

I squeeze her hand gently. “Do I think what?”

“Do you think he would do that?” A glance toward the black TV screen. “You know, find someone else while he’s traveling. Fall in love with her while I’m so far away.”

“Oh God. Oh, honey, no. I shouldn’t have let you see that movie.”

“No, of course you should. It’s her favorite movie.” She glances at my mother’s face, her expression softening. “She deserves to watch whatever she wants to watch.”

“Gabriel Miller would never cheat on you.”

“Right,” she says, but she doesn’t sound sure.

“And if he did, I would cut off his balls and feed them to—”

“He probably isn’t cheating. I just wish he’d come home.”

The hint of doubt in her eyes makes me furious. Not the kind of furious where I want to yell at someone or stomp around. The kind of furious that’s cold and empty. Helpless. That’s what it makes me feel. Which is exactly what my mother’s cancer makes me feel.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE SUIT

HELPLESS.

The word stays with me through the rest of the long night, through dreams of kings and goblins. I wake restless, as if something has been uncovered—but I don't know what. I spend the day giving my mother a manicure, a mud mask. A whole spa day in the comfort of her own bathroom. Only after dinner, when I put her to bed, when she drifts to sleep, do I get in my leased BMW and drive to the library.

My tools are neatly stashed in the trunk. The place that I park is right next to the side door, which has a lock. I normally step inside and get to work, my mind already spinning with ideas of new things to try with the wall. Except tonight I'm more interested in what's outside the library.

It's not only being in this building, Harper. It's the whole damn west side. We want to revitalize it, but it hasn't happened yet. That means it's full of crime and violence. It's fucking dangerous.

There are cracks in the sidewalk, pieces of the curb missing. Large potholes in the street. Those things didn't really stand out against the backdrop of a building blasted to pieces, but of course this damage must have been here before Christopher and Sutton ever purchased the land.

Behind the library there's an uneven parking lot that ends with a chain-link fence around the construction happening on the Bardot Tower. They aren't stuck in an infinite cycle of evaluation like the library, because they tore down whatever poor building stood there. I hate Christopher for his efficient dismantling of the past. And I envy him, too.

Low animal sounds slow my step. It sounds almost like the growl of a rabid dog in the alleyway up ahead. The hair on the back of my neck rises. I should turn around and go inside the library. No, if I were really concerned with safety, I'd get back in my car and drive home. *Do you have a death*

wish? Christopher asked me the question the first day we met, when he found me on the railing of the yacht smoking a joint. Maybe I do have a death wish, or at least morbid curiosity, because I keep creeping forward. Brick is cool against my palms as I lean close to peek around the wall.

There isn't a wild animal, at least not in the usual sense. Instead there's a man with his back against the library, his head thrown back, his hands grasping the hair of a girl at his feet.

His rough sounds bounce off the walls on either side, her wet sucking sounds the most sexually graphic thing I've ever heard in my life. I'm standing with my mouth open, more shocked than I would have thought to see sex performed so publicly… so degradingly. I've seen plenty of frat party shenanigans, even a few that went down in the record books. Girls on girls. Multiple partners. Drunken acrobatics.

None of them come close to this.

He turns them so she's against the wall, him shuffling with his jeans around his ankles. Then he thrusts into her hard and fast, so hard her sounds become louder, his ass muscles tensing on every push forward. He looks down at the top of her head like it's the hottest thing he's ever seen. Her hands are splayed against the brick behind her, holding her up in a crouch.

A roar and then he's coming into her mouth, pressing his hips flush against her face. I watch as her hands fist, my insides twisted with worry for her throat, for her ability to breathe. I take a step forward, ready to intervene, when finally he lets her go. She falls to the ground, panting against the gravel and decades' worth of detritus. He zips up, still panting loudly enough to be heard from twenty feet away. Then he pulls something out of his pocket. Money? He tosses it onto the floor in front of her before leaving the alleyway toward the street.

God. *God.* He just paid her for that blowjob. My body is confused as hell, torn between being hot at the explicit sexual display and angered by an act she probably did not enjoy.

Someone from my sorority was a cam girl. One corner of her room was decorated with frilly pink pillows and carefully placed composition notebooks and banners from a nonexistent sorority so she couldn't be traced. Sometimes we would join her for a playful little striptease to watch the horny Internet anons go crazy and make enough money to order shots at the bar later. She didn't enjoy what she did, not in a sexual way. It was a job

to her, the way you might be a clerk at the bookstore or a waitress at the diner off campus. She didn't get off on it, but she did like the money. And she had options. It wasn't a last resort to her, but as I watch the girl snatch the money and shove it into her shoe, I think this isn't a choice for her.

She stands gingerly, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. "You like the show?"

I stand there in silent shock before I'm sure she's talking to me. There's no point in hiding anymore, so I take a step into the alleyway, my body still flushed in confused arousal. "I'm sorry."

"There's usually a charge for someone watching."

"I didn't mean to… but I can pay you." I fumble for my purse, feeling slow and disconnected. This was happening outside the library, maybe every single night that I was inside, sculpting as if I could change the world with *art*. "How much is it? Never mind, I can just give you what I have—"

A harsh laugh. "Don't worry about it. I know you weren't with him."

"How do you know?"

"Besides the fact that you look like you stepped out of an ad for Anthropologie? Because he's a regular. And he doesn't bring girls around or ask for anything more complicated than a BJ."

There are things more complicated than that blowjob? Because it looked intense and difficult, every movement with subtle undertones of power. "A regular. Do you live around here?"

"Guess you could say that. I stay closer to here than you do, I'm guessing."

"You're making a lot of assumptions based on jeans and a T-shirt."

"Am I wrong?"

That makes me laugh. "Nah, I guess I'm easy to read."

"I'm surprised you stuck around once you saw what was happening. You a perv?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I didn't know that it was a… you know, a professional situation at first."

She giggles, which unsettles me because of how young she sounds. "A professional. Well, I'm not putting on a suit and carrying my briefcase into work, but yeah, I'm a pro."

I take a few steps closer, but the shadows don't reveal her face to me. "How old are you, anyway?"

That makes her stop laughing. “You aren’t a cop, are you?”

“God no.”

“It’s none of your damn business how old I am.” The bravado in her voice doesn’t scare me. It just makes me sad that she needs such strong defenses. “So go get your pervy kicks somewhere else.”

She takes a step back, and panic rises in my throat. “Wait. Let me give you the cash I have with me. It’s not that much, but it should be a couple nights at a motel or something.”

That makes her pause, at least. “That’s what you are. A Mother Theresa.”

I’m the one who snorts a laugh. “Definitely not.”

“You want to save me? You want to protect me from the big bad wolves of the world?”

“I don’t—” Except of course I do. “I just want to help, like a tiny bit. That’s all.”

There’s a pause while she wanders forward, almost as if she *is* a deer walking through the forest, unknowing of the dangers within. Then she’s a few feet away. The eyeliner can’t hide the hurt in her eyes. Her lips are still swollen and slick from the blowjob. This is why the community needs a library; this is why they need art that looks like hope. Because the west side takes girls and turns them into prostitutes. It leaves them on their hands and knees with money lying on the pavement. Books are the answer to this. Knowledge and a safe space in which to learn it.

“I’m not some kind of fashion genius,” she says, her voice hard and cold. “I figured you were the library girl as soon as I saw you.”

“The library girl?”

“The one who painted the library and made it fall down.”

There’s a wealth of condemnation in that voice. I wasn’t the reason the wrecking ball went into the front of the library, but I blame myself that I didn’t stop it sooner. “I’m sorry.”

“Nah, it wasn’t so bad. I had a stash of the painted pieces for a while. That shit was like gold. I’d sell them for twenty bucks when people would come around during the day.”

Twenty bucks, and those people would turn around and sell them online for hundreds, maybe thousands of dollars. My stomach twists with a sense of hopelessness. “I’m so sorry.”

“Now you just sound like the suit.”

“The what?”

She nods toward the library. Over the roof a skyscraper rises, gleaming in the wasteland. “The suit. He owns that building. Has eyes that look like coffee without any cream or sugar.”

Comes around to pay for rough blowjobs from desperate young women? Bile rises in my throat. I never had any right to expect monogamy from Christopher Bardot, but I pictured him with soap opera actresses and local socialites. “Is he…” I have to swallow down the acid before I can finish. “Is he a customer?” *Don’t break my heart, Christopher.*

“Nah,” she says, oblivious to the way relief fills me, warmth in my cold limbs. “He never touches me. But he gives me money whenever he comes down. Whatever he has with him, like you’re trying to do.”

I never would have expected that of Christopher. It makes me feel uneasy in my own skin, as if I’m a little itchy, sitting inside a world that doesn’t fit me anymore. “He does?” I ask faintly.

“It’s different when he gives me money, though, ’cause if he ever wanted a fuck, I’d give it to him for free anyway. I figure it’s kind of like a deposit until he gets hard up.”

That makes me laugh. “You wouldn’t consider the money I give you an advance?”

“Nah, you aren’t gonna fuck me. I already know. Besides that’s part of the deal with the suit. He told me to keep an eye on you. If any of my johns give you a hard time, I’m supposed to call him.”

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TOTALLY MY BUSINESS

I WANT TO seek out Christopher, but something holds me back. It's been bothering me since the night of the poker game, questions half-formed and smoky in my head. Only Sutton can tell me the truth about this.

Except Sutton isn't here.

He works at the library every day with the crew. He's the main person I talk to, how I know about the many, many problems they've found. The foundation problems.

The plumbing leaks. The termites. The broken pipes.

If testosterone were to stand up and walk around, it would look like Asher Cook. The foreman of the construction crew wears a white T-shirt, always crisp and clean in the morning. He's the only person here I actually know, now that Sutton's disappeared.

Always smudged in dirt and sweat by the end of the day.

His muscles bulge in a way that looks explicit, even fully clothed. A beard does little to hide his constantly surly expression. Dark eyebrows slash over pale green eyes, making me shiver every time he glances at me. He has a yellow hard hat, like everyone else, but frankly his head is probably made of tougher material. As if to prove the point, I find him hanging from the ceiling like some kind of explorer on Mount Kilimanjaro, some kind of complicated tool in his hand, shouting measurements to someone on the ground taking notes. From twenty feet in the air he manages to scowl when he sees me.

Which just makes my smile more cheerful. "Hello, Mr. Cook. Have you seen Sutton?"

At a rough gesture a pulley system lowers him to the ground. "Come with me." He doesn't wait for me to respond. His long strides take him halfway across the library before I catch up to him.

Asher stops at the wall so suddenly I almost fall into him.

I stand there looking for Sutton, because that must be why he brought me here. Except there's no one around. He gestures impatiently toward a tall metal structure on wheels. "Where the hell did this come from?"

"I don't know, it was just there one day." *From Christopher*, my mind helpfully supplies. This seems to confirm that he had it moved here for me. Like he can pull anything out of his pocket, even sea salt grilled edamame and forty foot scaffolding towers.

"Hell," he mutters. "I suppose that's better than you using our ladders."

A huff escapes me. "I put them back where I found them."

His pale green gaze could sear a hole straight through me. "After drawing graffiti all over the expensive fiberglass. In permanent marker. Don't think I didn't see that."

"Knowing my luck they're probably worth a fortune on the Internet." I have a tendency for turning straw into gold, but it doesn't feel like a blessing lately. Is this how Daddy felt? For maybe the first time in my life I feel an similarity with the man who fathered me. Money comes easy, but love is the elusive dream, the one thing always out of reach.

Asher makes a low sound of dissent. "I don't want to sell the ladders on the Internet. I want my men to use them, not jack off to them. And you should be wearing a hard hat inside the building. It's not safe for you to be here without one."

"Is it my fault your men would jack off to hand-drawn images of the goddess Circe? If that had been on a thousand-year-old cave, it would have been a sociological marvel. Because I'm born in the present time it's suddenly 'graffiti.'" I make quotes with my fingers, and I swear, there's a hint of a smile beneath that unruly beard before he frowns.

"This is serious. Hard hat or get the fuck out."

In that case I'll be getting the fuck out. "Have you seen Sutton?"

Asher looks uncomfortable, which makes me wonder if it's more than coincidence. Is Sutton avoiding me? "He isn't coming in today," Asher says finally. "He went to his ranch."

"Right," I say, trying not to sound deflated. "His ranch."

What does it mean?

Probably nothing, I tell myself, but I can't quite believe the lie.

I create new pieces with clay and use the new scaffolding to place them high, examining them in the afternoon light. The clay is only for me to test how things will look, because I go through ten ideas. And then ten more. And then throw it all away to start over.

Usually I'm decisive when it comes to my art. That's why I can paint a wall in one night without stopping. Inspiration drives me until I'm done. With the wall I'm all over the place. I'm not sure what makes this piece so different. Maybe because it's not a blank canvas. It's someone else's art, and I'm trying to add to it. Or maybe the wall is just a metaphor.

It could be there's a crack inside me, too.

Maybe my ability to create art is breaking, breaking, gone.

IN DESPERATION I go to the library during the day, hoping that the sunlight will give me a fresh perspective. Sutton would usually yell at me for being in the library at all, for being here without a hard hat, but he's gone.

My inspiration on the sculptures goes from bad to worse. I can't even bring myself to mix a batch of clay. Instead I order twelve pumpkins from grocery delivery and carve them one after the other, until my hands are a sticky mess. I don't carve cocks… at least, not all the pumpkins are cocks. I've been sculpting things that would fit into the giant crack in the wall—so really, it's no wonder my mind turned dirty.

By the time evening falls on the third day, I've made up my mind, but I still drive home. Mom and I share chicken noodle soup and freshly baked biscuits, which came out pretty amazing considering I got them from the refrigerated aisle. I pulled at the corner of the wrapper until it popped, startling both of us and making us laugh.

Her sleep patterns are all over the place lately. Instead of nodding off early, she stays awake all night, sorting through old photo albums of Dad and her and me when I was a baby. She finally falls asleep by the time the nurse shows up, and even though I haven't slept, I get in my car and head out of the city.

The ranch is an hour away from Tanglewood, but the drive feels quicker now. Sand streams through the funnel faster and faster. I don't bother to

knock on the door. I met his sister six months ago. She hated me on sight; she's hardly going to be more welcoming to me now.

Instead I head straight for the stables.

I half expect Sutton to already be working; don't ranchers wake up at three a.m. or something ridiculous? The sun already stretches across the rolling green.

The *empty* rolling green.

Dew gathers on my rose-gold leather flats. I'm wearing skinny jeans and a boatneck T-shirt that says *Namaste in Bed.* My hair is in a messy bun that looks pretty cute considering I tied it back before getting out of the car.

The stables are soft with the shuffle and snorts of horses. They watch me from their sideways eyes, their lashes long and beautifully curled. "Hello again," I say with a lame wave. "Do you remember me? I came here and brought your human back to the city."

No response, but that's probably not the way to win them over.

I walk past a gorgeous ebony horse who reminds me of the book *Black Beauty*. And a smaller chestnut brown with long hair that seems to fall into his eyes. I don't actually know whether they're male or female, and it seems rude to try to peek. I didn't even buy them dinner first.

Gold Rush is in the last stall, standing as far away from the door as she can. Her beautiful white-beige mane shines in the faint morning light. Her eyes are a pale color too, a sort of gray that seems to go on for miles. "You really are beautiful," I tell her, a little wistful. "I can't be too mad at Sutton for coming to visit you, can I?"

She shakes her head, a little show of defiance at me for speaking.

"I bet you give him a hard time when he's been gone too long, don't you? The cold shoulder. Make him really work for it. I feel you, sister. You and me both."

The stall next to hers is empty, which I think might not be an accident. She's wary around humans, I already know, but is she also nervous around horses? Probably, which makes me terribly sad. To be isolated from everyone, even your own kind. It's a goddamn tragedy.

I take a step closer to the door, muscles tense in case I need to jump away. "Do they judge you for being different?" I whisper. "Do they wish you would be obedient like they are?"

Her foreleg lifts and then stomps lightly, sending up a small cloud of dust.

“They don’t understand,” I say. “Do they? They don’t know why you fight it so hard.”

She takes a step toward me, and I hold my breath, waiting for something violent. Something wild. Except she only stretches her neck toward me. Softly, softly. I hold my hand out, unwilling to reach past the door. I’m right on the edge, waiting.

Her breath whooshes against my palm.

“Get away from her.”

The strident command makes Gold Rush pull away with an indignant snort, and I jump back in surprise. Sutton is only a dark shadow against the backdrop of sunrise. Hurt clenches my chest, and I take a step back nice and slow. “Are you avoiding me?”

A pause while he crosses the stable to stand beside me. He comes into focus in parts—his golden hair, his tanned skin. His blue eyes. They look hard this morning. “No.”

Except the reserve in his expression wasn’t there last time I saw him. He *is* avoiding me. “You said you weren’t mad at me,” I whisper, regret a cold rock in my throat.

“Is that what you think this is? Some kind of revenge bullshit?”

“Not when you put it that way. But I don’t know what else it could be.” I don’t know how else to reconcile the charming man who pushed me up against the wall of L’Etoile with the man who had sex with me and then immediately left. The man who sat in my kitchen with a warm smile and then left town to avoid me.

He swears softly, turning away toward the back door of the stable, where a honeycomb of pastures begins. “You shouldn’t have come here. And you sure as hell shouldn’t go near Gold Rush. Not anywhere near her stall.”

“Because she’s been neglected?”

“Because she’s dangerous.”

“Maybe she’ll get socialized faster if you don’t put her in the corner.”

“Yeah? Or maybe she’ll kick hard enough to break the door down.”

“Why are you being so hard on her?”

“Why do you care?” His tone is cold enough to freeze me where I stand, but I have a lot of experience dealing with assholes. I fell in love with one when I was sixteen.

“Because you’re doing the same damn thing to me that you did to her, putting her away when it gets hard, telling yourself that you’re doing it for her own good.”

He takes a step closer to me, his silence heavy. “It’s not you,” he says, and I shake my head.

“Don’t lie to me.”

“It’s not *only* you.” He looks more than pissed off; he looks shaken. As if my presence here bothers him on a bone-deep level. As if talking about this reaches to the core of him.

“What the hell is going on, Sutton? This is more than competition between two alpha males, isn’t it? I know it is. You’re hiding something.”

He turns away from me, proving the point. “It’s none of your business.”

A few steps and I plant myself in front of him again. “You had your cock inside me a few weeks ago. You played with my clit while you groaned my name. This is totally my business.”

His low growl reaches into my chest. “You could have said no.”

“I wanted you then.” I take a step closer, enveloped in the scent of earth and sweat and sex. “And I want you now. I think you want me too.”

An uneven laugh. “I look at you and I’m hard. You give me attitude, and I’m like goddamn iron. There’s about a hundred ways I want you, and when we’re done with that, I’ll think up a hundred more.”

He doesn’t take a step toward me. Doesn’t move a muscle. “What’s stopping you?”

“And when you’re done fucking around with me?”

I flinch at the word *fucking*, the way it’s laced with accusation. The way he makes it sound hollow. Isn’t he right? It’s not like we’re married, riding off into the sunset on three of his horses. We had a threesome after an illegal poker game. “Don’t tell me you found religion.”

Another low sound, this one menacing. He does move then, pushing me back, crowding me against slats of wood. “You don’t have one goddamn idea what I believe.”

“Then tell me,” I challenge, pushing back, my palms against his chest. They don’t move him any, but they give me an excuse to touch him. To

measure him. To feel the muscles he's holding in check.

He dips his head near mine. "You're not the only one I dream about."

My body responds to the seductive timbre in his voice, which is sad, really sad, because he must be in love with someone else. At least in lust with someone else. "Another woman?"

"No, sweetheart."

I pull back, staring hard at those beautiful blue eyes. "You're not—But he—"

"Go ahead and say it," he says in a drawl. "Spell it out for the horses, here. They don't understand."

My cheeks feel warm. I've turned over every rock, searching, demanding answers, and now that they're exposed to the sun, I'm suddenly worried. "You don't have to tell me."

"Oh, I think I do. After all I had my cock inside you not long ago. I played with your clit while I groaned your name. Isn't that what you said?"

I swallow hard. "You… and Christopher?"

"No," he says sharply. "Don't get the wrong idea. We're not an item. Never have been. Never will be."

"But you want to be," I whisper. "Does he know?"

A rough sound. "Does he know? I don't even fucking know half the time. It's a goddamn mystery. A riddle designed to drive me slowly insane. It's un-fucking-knowable."

All the pain inside him pours out. It's always been there, simmering around him. Disguised as Southern charm, when really he's caught in unrequited love. Unrequited desire?

"All this time," I say, slowly wondering. I'm not hurt by this revelation, but there's time for that later. "When you wanted me. It's because of my connection to Christopher. When you took me to the theater, when you knelt down in front of me at L'Etoile. When you first saw me in your office."

"No. Yes. Hell, I'm not lying to you. You take over every room that you walk into. I knew there was something special about you from the way Christopher talked, and then when I met you, it was over."

"What does that mean?"

"It means it doesn't matter whether I wanted to use you to get back at Christopher. Or to get close to him. When I saw you, when I got to know

you, I fell for *you*, not for who you were to him."

"Oh, and you just magically got over him?"

"No," he says, as solemn as I've ever seen him. "I wish it were that simple."

I let my hands fall to my side, away from him. The loss feels like a physical blow. "You never really wanted me. Tell me the truth, Sutton. I deserve that much."

Something dark moves beneath those blue eyes. "Christ. Want you? I didn't want you, sweetheart. It was a craving. A need. Do you know how much it tore me up?" His voice comes out ragged, a man at the end of his rope. "I've spent the past six months trying to get you out of my head."

"Did it work?"

His gaze doesn't leave mine. "I wake up hard every morning, your taste on my tongue."

"It's as close as you'll ever get to Christopher Bardot. Is that it?" My voice is taunting because I'm too shaken up. Too aware that I was between these men, both physically and emotionally. "You really want to suck his dick, but I'm the one who got to do it."

He grabs my hand and presses it against his jeans. The denim is well-worn from washing. I can feel him hard and impossibly hot. "This feel like I don't want you?"

I squeeze gently, and he makes a sound low in his throat.

"Go back to Tanglewood," he says, a little breathless.

He's thick and ready in my hand. I could push down my skinny jeans and turn around. He would be inside me in a matter of seconds. We would fuck like animals in this barn, but what would happen next? We'd have to face the reality that he wants Christopher.

And maybe I'd have to face the reality that I want Christopher, too.

I take a step back.

His blue gaze takes in every inch of me. I'm standing in the most unsexy pose in the history of the world, but he looks appreciative. My clothes might as well be see-through. There's a world of promise in that gaze. And for maybe the first time since his revelation, I think he might have been telling the truth about wanting us both.

All this time I wondered whether it was possible for me to love two men. The complexity of that. The pain of it. And Sutton had been struggling

with his own impossible choice.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FOR YOUR ENTERTAINMENT

I'M NOT COMPLETELY clueless when it comes to boys.

Sometimes it feels that way when I'm torn between Christopher and Sutton, when I'm a small boat tossed between an unforgiving night and stormy seas. But I used to give excellent advice when it came to boys. Everyone at Smith College came to me with questions—both the girls and the boys. Gay, straight, bisexual, whatever. I'd only ever had my fingers between my legs, never a man, but that didn't matter. I still knew the way boys thought. I knew what made them tick. I predicted their next move before they even figured it out.

But I had no idea that Sutton was interested in Christopher all along.

Had I been blind because I wanted Sutton to be interested in only me? Or had he really buried the feelings down so deep that they were almost invisible? It makes me wonder what else I've been missing.

Well, maybe that's the difference.

I'm not completely clueless when it comes to boys, but Christopher and Sutton—they aren't boys. They're men. And I'm finding them as mysterious as living, breathing surrealist art.

Yes, Daddy made me cynical about men. Maybe my mother did that too, marrying so many rich assholes after him. I assume the worst about them, but they just keep proving me right. Even Christopher, which breaks me anew every single time. Who puts me back together with those rare moments of tenderness.

Around eight o'clock there's a knock on my front door. I open the door, ignoring the sense of relief that at least I guessed this part correctly. A mysterious man, a tormented man, but still a man.

Sutton fills the doorframe, his body ridiculously handsome in a thin T-shirt that hugs his arms and falls loose at his waist. And the torn jeans that

have no right to look that sexy.

His face is in shadows, but I feel the torment radiating from him. “Can I come in?” he asks, a little gruff. I’ve seen him in a business suit making decisions around a conference table. I’ve seen him with his sleeves rolled up and a hard hat on, giving orders to a construction crew. There are a hundred ways he shows his strength, but he’s never seemed as masculine as he does now—when he’s achingly vulnerable to me.

“Is this a booty call?” I ask, hand on my hip.

He looks down at the row of pumpkins, each featuring a different-shaped cock. There’s long and short, thick and curved. “Is that what you want?”

“A bunch of cocks?” I glance back to where *Casablanca* plays on the TV. Mom fell asleep before the French national anthem drowned out the German soldiers. “Maybe it’s what you want. We should call Christopher so you can have a good time.”

The words are a challenge, and Sutton responds with a small laugh. “Call whoever you want, sugar. But don’t pretend it’s because you don’t want him.”

I reach for his wrist, ignoring the spark when we touch, ignoring the play of tendon and muscle within my grip as I pull him inside. “Oh, come in.”

He leans back against the door after he closes it. His arms cross, which make them bulge in a way that’s hard not to admire. “Where did you see all those, anyway? I know you were a virgin when Christopher fucked you.”

“There’s lots of different kinds of experience,” I say in a haughty voice, as worldly as Ingrid Bergman on the big screen. She was a lover to one man and married to another, a feat she managed with total grace. I bet she never wondered if she was going insane.

Sutton doesn’t look convinced, so I admit, “Naked models in art class. They aren’t really supposed to be erect, but someone would usually tell dirty jokes until they got hard.”

“It was you, wasn’t it?”

“Okay. Yes. *God.*”

His lips quirk. “And I bet they went home and jacked off all night long.”

I can’t help but dip my gaze to the bulge in his jeans, the denim worn around the edges. My breath hitches as I remember what he felt like inside

me. He makes a growling sound. “If you look at me that way, I’m going to do something about it.”

My feet back up before I can plan a retreat. Apprehension and desire war in my body. “Mom’s not in bed yet. We’re watching a movie.”

His eyes don’t leave mine. “I can wait.”

That’s what I’m worried about. I’ve never met a man with more patience. More determination. And it’s scary, because I can feel my defenses crumbling every second. Only I’m not sure what he’s fighting for—Christopher or me.

Or maybe some combination that can never come true.

Sutton helps me wake up Mom, who says she hadn’t actually slept for an hour of the movie. She insists on playing cards with Sutton, who agrees with an easy smile. I make hot cocoa for everyone—extra marshmallows for Sutton—while my mother wins three rounds of gin.

It’s almost possible to believe she isn’t sick until it’s time for her to go to sleep. Then I help her walk up the stairs because she’s too weak to climb them herself. I tuck her into bed like she’s a child, because it’s one of the only things I can do.

There is an assortment of herbal medicines I hand her, one after the other. The only prescription medicine she allows is something that helps her sleep.

“That Sutton is a nice man,” she says, her voice soft. “Not like your daddy.”

Acid burns my throat because I think she’s right.

And because I think she’s wrong.

He’s not mean like Daddy, but even Daddy was nice once. He had been in love with the woman who now looks so frail beneath the pin-tuck comforter. It was his own ambition that made everything terrible, and both Sutton and Christopher have plenty of ambition.

A feeling of melancholy settles over me like falling leaves on the front lawn.

Downstairs I find Sutton with a bottle of wine and two glasses. That's how we end up in front of the fireplace, my toes warm from the gas fire. The scent of pine cones fills the air—an affectation from the expensive fake log. It's not exactly a rustic scene, but it pretends to be one.

"So what's the deal with your not-sister?" I ask, taking a sip of wine.

"My what?"

"The woman I met at your ranch earlier this year."

"Ah." He stares into the fire, his jaw square and shadowed. "I already told you I worked on a ranch. My daddy was a drunk and a bastard, but he had a way with horses, which is why they kept him around as long as they did."

How many frat boys have I sat with, taking confessions from them like I'm some kind of female priest? Never has it been as important to me as now, never have I strained forward, hungry for every word out of his mouth.

"He had a way with women, too. Slept with most every woman in a hundred miles, despite the fact that he had no money and not a speck of kindness."

If he had half his son's good looks, it didn't exactly surprise me. Those blue eyes could charm anyone into anything… in my case, they charmed a virgin into a threesome. "You hated him."

"Everyone hated him, but no one more than me. There were all these blue-eyed kids. People whispered about it. But in the end they got to live somewhere else. I was the only one stuck with him."

"I'm sorry."

"Hell… I don't… It's old news around here. Everyone knew about it. Except maybe Whitney. She was younger than me. Maybe people were more careful about what they said around her."

"And she had a crush on you?" It's disturbing enough to have a crush on my stepbrother; I know what that's like. But it would be way more disturbing to have had a crush on an actual blood relative. That would be hard to live down.

"I tried to discourage her without telling her. In the end it was some kid at school who gave her the bad news, and by then she was humiliated. Didn't speak to me for a year. She forgave me in the end, but it was unfortunate."

“You probably just… made her feel safe. When you’re young, that feels like love.”

“The ranch was worn at the edges when I worked there. By the time I grew up, her daddy had died and the place was in debt. It was the first property I ever bought.”

“Not the last.”

He comes to stand in front of me. “The library was the last.”

Only a foot of air separates us now. I have to look up to meet his gaze. “Christopher has a way of ruining a person, doesn’t he? You meet him and boom, it’s all over.”

That earns me a faint smile. “You’re pretty destructive yourself.”

I place my palm on his chest, feeling the steady rise of his breath, the beat of his heart. “You feel nice and solid. Put together. Not broken at all.”

“A trick of the light,” he says softly, blue eyes intent on mine.

“Have you told him?” I whisper because confessions can’t come too loud.

A slow shake of his head. He retreats to the armchair opposite mine. “What would I say? He makes me want to punch him in the face. He makes me want to climb out of my skin. There’s not a word for what I feel when he’s in the room.”

“Desire?”

“The closest thing would be… maybe obsession. The most unhealthy, fucked-up kind of obsession. It made me throw my money in with his. Made me go after the woman he loves.”

Obsession. “Do people ever just meet and fall in love and get married?”

That earns me a soft laugh. “I’m sure you’ve met plenty of well-adjusted guys in college. Why aren’t you married to one of them already?”

“I don’t know,” I say, but that’s a lie. I wanted magic and fireworks and the kind of explosive chemistry that changes my DNA. It makes me sound too naive to admit that.

“I’ll tell you why. Because none of them could have kept up with you, none of those pumpkin cocks would have been enough.”

His words echo on my skin with total truth. Those frat boys who brought me lukewarm beer in a plastic cup, the ones who lured me into an upstairs bedroom only to collapse into confessions at the slightest sign of kindness. They couldn’t have handled the real me, and the thought gives me

a sense of power. A sense that, amid my confusion and doubt, I'm in the right place.

I'm wearing jeans and a T-shirt, my makeup smudged after a long day, drops of water on my shirt from helping my mother shower before bed. This is the least sexy I've ever been, but I become a siren right here in this armchair. I'm a seductress for the ages as I stand up in front of Sutton. His blue eyes darken, proving me right, goading me on.

It doesn't really matter what I look like, anyway. I'm burned out on grief, desperate to feel something real. Maybe I want Christopher, but so does Sutton.

All we have in this moment is each other.

"What are you doing?" he asks, sounding amused. "Do you want a new model for your pumpkins? Because I have to tell you, I'm not going to stand very still like the boys at art school. I'm not going to get hard for your entertainment."

"No?" I ask, reaching for the hem of my T-shirt. I have on a plain white bra underneath, but it might as well be black silk for how proud I feel once I'm bared. "But I would heckle you so nicely. And I think you'd enjoy it, Sutton, I really do."

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "You are playing with fire."

"Sometimes a girl wants to get burned." I push my jeans down my hips and step out of them, revealing plain pink panties that are soft from washing a hundred times, and he sucks in a breath. He's already hard, judging from the way the denim stretches taut between his legs. He's tense everywhere, muscles flexing in his arms, his thighs. His whole body held at alert.

His voice is hoarse. "If I get up from this chair I'm going to have you bent over the side of the couch so fast you'll get dizzy. I won't bother taking off your panties, I'll push them out of the way so I can get inside you. I'll reach under your bra and touch your breasts, pinch your nipples until your tight little pussy squeezes around my cock."

Now it's my turn to squirm, legs pressing together where I stand. My body aches for what he promises, but I don't want to lose control of the situation. "You aren't allowed to get up from that chair. Those are the rules."

"Never been real good at following rules, sugar."

“Does that mean you can’t handle me? I thought you were stronger than those frat boys.”

A low chuckle. He stands up with slow, deliberate movements. And he pulls his shirt off the same way, revealing ridges of well-defined abs and a landscape of tanned skin. “I’m plenty strong, but I think you know that. Strong enough to see through your rules bullshit.”

My mouth feels dry. There’s a jump in my heartbeat that reminds me of holding my hand out to Gold Rush, feeling her breath against my palm. Having so much violence so barely restrained. There’s no wooden door between me and the animal in front of me now.

“Strong enough to give you exactly what you want, even if you’re going to fight me.” He opens the placket of his jeans, revealing his bare cock. No underwear or boxers between the rough denim and his flesh. He’s hard and thick and shiny at the tip. He runs a cruel fist down the length of his erection, twisting at the top as if he needs to hold something off.

Even if you’re going to fight me. The crazy thing is, even I don’t know if I’m going to fight him. The way he looks at me makes me wet and pliant. My fear makes me stiff. I take a step back. “I’m allowed to say no, Sutton.”

“You’re allowed to. Maybe I’ll even believe you.”

And then he would leave me here, all worked up with nothing but my pumpkin cocks to satisfy me. “You really do want me,” I say, my gaze flicking from his hard cock to his intense eyes. “I’m not just a Christopher stand-in.”

He laughs, though there’s no humor in it. “Oh, sugar. You have no idea. I would fuck you all night long, even if I never saw Christopher again. I would fuck you for the rest of my life if you let me. You’re the one using me as a stand-in.”

The idea makes me gasp, but there’s no time to dwell on it. No time to think about whether I would really do that. No time to wonder why, because Sutton always keeps his promises. He flips me around and has me bent over the curved arm of the sofa. My body arches as he touches two fingers to my most sensitive place. Arousal gives him all the slickness he needs. It’s my own desire that betrays me, letting him invade me. Then his cock nudges me, burning hot.

I arch my back, though I don’t know whether I’m asking him to wait or wanting him to do it harder. Faster. Deeper. Then he slides inside, and it’s

like I’m complete. My body had been hurting from the space inside it, and now he’s there—filling me almost like he belongs there. It’s the fake pine cone scent from the logs, a way to pretend this is real.

He cups my breast through the white bra, and I flinch away, already knowing what comes next. He told me, didn’t he? He told me how the story went, but still I find it shocking when he presses my nipple between thumb and forefinger, when he sends a bite of pain through my breast.

“I’m not,” I gasp between the first thrust and the second, my eyes shutting tight against the pleasure so sharp it turns to pain. “Not. Not. Not.”

“Not what?” he murmurs, pressing deep for a long moment.

I’m not using him as a Christopher stand-in, at least I don’t think so. And I don’t think he’s using me, either. “I’m not in love with Christopher Bardot.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” A hard thrust. Another. “You keep saying it.”

I don’t know whether he means it literally, but that’s what I do. I say it out loud, over and over. “I’m not in love with… not in love with Christopher… Oh God, Christopher Bardot!”

He finds my clit, merciless with two rough fingers, making me flinch. “Say it again.”

“I’m not,” I sob, but it feels more and more like a lie.

Sutton bites down on my shoulder, and the bright-hot pain is enough to shatter me. A low keening sound fills the room, the sound of my longing, the terrible pleasure I take from it—and behind me, the agonized groan of a man pushed past reason. His hips press against mine, hard enough I have to gasp for breath, my mouth open against the embroidered fabric of the sofa, hands clenching at nothing, his tongue laving the teeth marks he left on my skin.

In the aftermath we collapse in a heap, the sofa giving a slight shift of discomfort under our combined weights. Sutton moves when I’m still boneless, lifting himself off me and turning me over. His hands are gentle as he pulls on my clothes. It’s like he’s mourning something.

“We should talk. Tomorrow at the library. We’ll talk then.”

I stop him, my hand clasping his. “Stay.”

He doesn’t look broken, but I’ve learned that it’s a beautiful facade. The intimacy we shared pulled down the walls, if only for a few seconds. Those

calloused hands, so strong and sure with a dangerous horse, they're shaking. He needs the comfort of welcoming arms as much as I do.

And so I lead him back to the sofa, where we fall into a sudden and boundless sleep, our limbs tangled together, taking solace in a shared desperation.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

HONEST TO A FAULT

IN MY DREAM there are piles of straw, mountains of it, and no matter how hard I try, I can't spin them into gold. My fingers are torn up from the attempts, bloodied and raw. There's a lock on the door and a faint lightening of sky through the bars, which means the king will expect me to be done spinning soon. I'm running out of time.

I wake up with a sudden start, my eyes wide open as I look around the living room. A knock comes at the door, and I realize that must have woken me up. My palms are pressed to a chest as wide and solid as a table, but rising and falling in gentle breaths. Sutton looks up at me, rather adorable in his sleepy state. "You expecting someone?" he says, his voice rusty.

A glance at my phone. Four thirty. In the morning.

I pull open the door, half expecting there to be some kind of overly polite burglar. Who else shows up at four thirty? Christopher Bardot, apparently. He doesn't even have the grace to look sleepy. Instead he leans casually against the doorjamb, one hand in the pocket of worn gray sweatpants. His white T-shirt looks like it's been washed a million times and probably feels like heaven. I have no doubt that he stepped out of bed looking like this, which is proof that the universe is fundamentally unfair. My eyes feel bloodshot, the place between my legs sore.

"I hope there's a bullet wound under that crisp white shirt," I tell him, my voice dark with exhausted aggravation. "Because I can't think of any other reason you'd be here at this time."

"We have to talk."

"About the meaning of life? About the birds and the bees? What could you possibly have to say to me at four thirty in the freaking morning that couldn't wait for six hours?"

"It's about the library. You can't fix it."

“Oh God, not this again.”

“The building isn’t fucking stable.”

“You’re not stable,” I say, knowing full well that I sound like a five-year-old. But it’s really early. Or late, depending on how you count it. All I know is that I’ve had about two hours of sleep. “Why don’t you just build your little skyscraper and pretend the library doesn’t exist?”

“I wish I could,” he says grimly.

I feel the heat of Sutton’s body before I hear him. “What’s going on?”

Christopher’s eyes darken. “What the hell is he doing here?”

Guilt shoots through me, which is seriously unfortunate because I don’t owe Christopher Bardot any explanations. My body doesn’t understand that. My body thinks it owes many things, and it decides to enumerate them using my imagination. “We’re braiding each other’s hair, and later we’re going to use my Ouija board. What do you think he’s doing here?”

“Harper, you can’t believe everything he tells you.” Christopher looks like he wants to say more, but he presses his lips together and looks away. “Hell.”

Sutton holds my hips in a possessive and challenging gesture. “That’s convenient coming from you. I think you’re the one she shouldn’t believe.”

“God,” I say, sleep clearing from my eyes. “You two just want to growl over me. It could be anything between you. I’m like a scrap of meat, and you’re just hungry.”

“You like it when I’m hungry,” Sutton says, placing an openmouthed kiss to the side of my neck. He pulls one hand up until it rests under my breast. The other curves around to the lower plain of my belly, right above my sex. It’s an incredibly intimate way to touch me, and I’m standing in the front door backlit by a soft lamp from inside.

Christopher’s jaw works. His whole body looks tense, a spring pressed down into its smallest form, vibrating with the force to keep it that way. What would he do if he unleashed that power? Would he attack Sutton with blind rage? Or would he take it out on me in sensual torment, like he did at the Den? I’m holding my breath, and I can’t deny that I hope for the latter. The three of us together are dysfunctional and wrong, but it feels so good.

“You want her?” Sutton asks gently, and I think he’s pushing. Not only for sex. He’s pushing until Christopher breaks. Until there’s no hope of them together.

And maybe I’m doing the same thing.

Sometimes the Death Plan isn’t printed in black-and-white. Sometimes it’s whispering to us in the middle of the night. Sometimes it’s leaning back against Sutton’s body, knowing it will make Christopher come closer. His lips part, looking full, almost swollen as he watches us from beneath heavy lids. What would he say if he saw us bent over the sofa?

I’m not in love with Christopher Bardot.

Fear squeezes my throat. I’d rather push him away than watch him leave. “Come inside,” I say with a patently fake smile. “It’s more fun with both of you.”

Christopher turns away from us, and I realize this hurts just as much. *You can’t avoid this forever.* I break away from Sutton’s hold and run after him. “Wait.”

He stops a foot away from his car, still looking away. His body is held rigid, emanating intense emotion without moving a muscle. “You shouldn’t trust him.”

“You used to tell me that I shouldn’t trust you either.”

“That’s true, too. Leave the both of us. Go back to New York. LA. Anywhere but here.”

“I can’t do that.” I can tell myself that it’s the library that keeps me here, but I have a growing suspicion that it’s the man in front of me. If he went to Tokyo, I’d probably have to protest to save the cherry blossoms. It’s a terrible weakness in me, this feeling.

“Or make him tell you the truth.”

That makes me smile, though it’s a little sad. “Do *you* know the truth?”

“What are you talking about?”

Sutton’s obsession might not be one-sided. In that case I could be the one who brings them together. And then the one that’s left standing as they ride off into the sunset. “I didn’t think you were a coward, Christopher Bardot. To want someone and not tell them.”

His eyes narrow. He reaches for me before I can blink, turning me before I can breathe, backing me up against the dew-dropped surface of his Tesla. “You want a declaration, Harper?”

This close I can see little silver flecks in his black eyes. How have I never noticed them before? He looks pissed off and wild, like a powerful animal that has suddenly found itself in an ironclad cage. He looks afraid,

and I’m suffused with a sense of wonder. What could scare this man? Nothing, I would have said. But I would have been wrong. “Do you have anything to declare?” I whisper, a little mocking.

He leans forward, his lips an inch from my cheek. “Who’s the coward now?” he murmurs against my temple, brushing a kiss so light it’s like air.

What would bravery look like right now? No, I’m not very courageous. There’s curiosity inside me, to see Sutton and Christopher together now that I know the feelings underneath. And there’s my own growing unrest. Sometimes you have to break something in order to fix it.

“Come inside,” I say, holding out my hand.

Sutton looks more surprised than me to see Christopher. As if pushing and pushing had been an archaic kind of mating ritual, one so ineffective that he had resigned himself to it never working. I have to face the facts—there is a chance that Christopher has buried feelings for Sutton, too. That I will lose both of them tonight. But I’m not going to hide in the shadows any longer. Not going to wait and wait and wait for these men to decide. I’m making the decisions right now, and I want them both in my bed.

The living room smells like warmth and roasted pumpkin seeds and sex. Sutton’s shirt is slung over the armchair. The cushions on the sofa are smooshed and rumpled from our bodies. It could possibly feel like a scene of guilt, of shame, and maybe when there was first a knock on the door it did.

Now it feels like Sutton and I are doing something together, like we’ve created this on purpose—the purpose being to seduce Christopher Bardot. It’s working, if the clench of his jaw is anything to go by. And the bulge against his jeans.

“Upstairs.” I mean to say it hard, like a command, but it comes out breathy. Both men follow me anyway, silent and large and looming on the sweeping staircase. It feels like I’m Little Red Riding Hood with two wolves prowling behind me, wondering which one will eat me first.

There’s always the chance they’ll eat each other.

My room has the flowered bedspread and antique dresser that was here when we moved in. There are no pictures on the side table, no modern art hanging on the wall. That’s a good thing. It makes this more like a hotel room, which is where we first consummated our threesome.

“Where do you want me?” Christopher asks, and I have to acknowledge how truly weird this is. There are two men in this room with me. This may not be the first time we’ve been together, but it feels so strongly like the last.

“On the bed,” Sutton says, his voice soft and supple like worn leather.

“I asked Harper,” Christopher says, diamond eyes flashing.

“And I’m telling you what she wants. Or can’t you tell? Can’t you see how wet she gets when you look at her that way, all cold and mean? It turns her on.”

Except how could Christopher have seen that. Even I couldn’t see that, and it’s my body. Now that Sutton has said the words, I can’t unsee it. I can’t unfeel it. The only thing I can focus on is the way my nipples feel against my shirt, like a thousand nerve endings against sandpaper. The only thing I can see is the cruel twist to Christopher’s lips. My body feels molten inside; he did that to me.

Christopher doesn’t break eye contact as he sits on the edge of the bed. Such an innocuous thing to do, sit on the edge of a bed with all your clothes on. There’s nothing inherently explicit about the act, but there’s a livewire in my brain. A livewire that jolts me so hard and painful, because we’re going to have sex. One thing is very different from the time at the poker game—this time I know how Sutton feels.

He looks the same as he always does, smug and laconic and a little too casual to be true. He takes a step toward Christopher, careful, careful, and I’m reminded of the way he approached Gold Rush. Affecting a calm that he didn’t quite feel, pretending that he wasn’t one hard kick away from having his skull bashed in. Sutton is good at pretending.

Except that Christopher does not appear fooled.

He stares hard at Sutton in that calculating way, as if adding up the cards and realizing there’s one he missed. A notch forms between dark eyebrows.

“What about you?” he asks quietly. “Does it turn you on, too?”

Sutton flinches. “This isn’t about me.”

Black eyes flash. “I’ve played cards with you enough times to know your tells. And that one was a goddamn red flashing light. You want to say something to me?”

A dark laugh. “There’s nothing to say.”

Sexual violence rolls through the room, as heavy and electric as stormclouds. This could break out into a fight. Or it could break out into sex. I know which one I'd rather have.

"You," I murmur to Sutton. "I want you on the bed."

He looks at me like an animal backed into a corner, the whites of his eyes almost showing. "I'm supposed to do what you say. I'm supposed to trust you."

That makes me smile. "I've trusted you plenty. Was I supposed to do that?"

A low growl. If there were fur on him, it would rise at the back of his neck. There's practically a snarl on his handsome face. It's hard to imagine that he's the softer of the two men right now. He looks feral. But he walks toward the bed. He sits down.

"All the way." My voice comes out hard. I think maybe he likes me hard.

He scoots back, his gaze promising retribution. "What next?"

I pretend to think about that, even though the vision is in my head clear as day. Clear as the feel of Sutton against my back and Christopher at my front. I have been between those two men in multiple ways, but never the one we're going to do tonight.

"Come here," I say to Christopher, a little shy.

It's easy to be the strong, seductive woman with Sutton. That's the only way he's ever seen me. Christopher has seen me young and stupid. He's seen me in love.

He tears his gaze from Sutton, uncertainty in his dark eyes. The question hovers on his lips, almost visible in the space between us. *Is this more than a rivalry between Sutton and me? Is this lust? Does Sutton want to fuck me? Do I want to fuck him back?*

"Yes," I say, my voice soft and coaxing. "Or no. Those are your options."

A faint smile. "You want to be in charge."

"Maybe, but you definitely want me to be in charge."

"Yeah," he says, a low rumble.

This isn't the time for talking about feelings. What would Sutton say?

The most unhealthy, fucked-up kind of obsession.

No, this is only something that can be felt. The way that works with Gold Rush in that corral, both gentle and firm. The way he has to break her to make her trust again.

Christopher comes to me, a little wary. Even when I order him around, he's still tall enough that I have to look up. He gazes down at me with an impassive expression. Only the faint tremor running through his hard body gives him away. He wants this. Whatever wild thing happens next, even if it involves the bristling man on the bed.

I reach up and lick the corner of Christopher's lips. He sucks in a breath.

"How are you doing this?" he asks, but I'm not sure what he means. Ordering two men around? By giving them what they secretly want, that's how. Even if they want each other.

Even if I'll be left alone in this room after.

My hands go to Christopher's shirt, pulling it up to reveal his abs with slow precision. I could be performing surgery, that's how careful I am right now. I could be cutting out my own heart with a goddamn scalpel. His chest looks bronze in the moonlight, like he's forged and molded. Like he's hollow inside. Except he's warm to the touch. I press my palm against his chest and feel the steady beat of his heart.

He's the one who moves to his pants, his gaze never leaving mine, as if obeying some unspoken command. *Undress*, I could have said to the most severe man I've ever met. He pushes down his sweatpants and kicks them off, revealing the hard length of him.

Only our breathing can be heard after that.

His pants are open, slack. He's so put together. It's a privilege to see him like this, coming apart. His hand twitches when I reach for him—maybe to stop me. Maybe to pull me closer. In the end he leaves his arms at his side. I run a finger down the center of his chest, feeling the indent of muscle and flesh. The wiry hair at the base.

My fist closes around him.

"God," he groans, throwing back his head.

He's beautiful like this, but I can't look at him. I need to see what Sutton's doing. He doesn't disappoint. He has his jeans undone and shoved down his muscular thighs, his cock in hand. He's staring at Christopher's body, lips parted, eyes heavy.

This is a man getting his deepest wish, and it gives me a sense of power to be the one who can fulfill it for him. Even as Christopher bucks against my hand. “That’s right,” I whisper.

Christopher stares at me through slitted eyes, his lips pulled tight. “You want me to embarrass myself, is that it? This some kind of revenge fuck?”

This is the farthest thing from a revenge fuck. The exact opposite. I’m putting together something that I broke. The partnership between the men. Maybe more than a partnership.

“Would you mind?” I ask, a smile flickering at my lips.

“Fuck,” he says, lean hips fucking my fist. “Christ. I wouldn’t.”

Seeing Christopher in command is enough to make me wet, but seeing him this way, surrendering—it’s enough to make me want to weep. It’s like having a star on my palm. I know I won’t be able to keep it, but I’ll stay very still to make this last.

I turn and climb onto the bed. When I glance back Christopher is looking at my ass, almost forlorn now that he’s the only one standing. “Come here,” I murmur.

He follows me, but I move back. He has to chase me on the king bed.

And then I’m pressed up against Sutton’s body, his hard body jerking on impact, his cock like a brand through my dress at the back. Then Christopher is on me, his lips hard on mine, payback for the orders, punishing. His tongue pushes inside my mouth.

I want to be the calm and unaffected seductress, but my body is melting between these two men. It would be impossible not to melt. There’s hardness behind me. Hardness in front. A slickness between my legs like a goddamn river, and Christopher knows it.

“Push your panties out of the way,” he says against my lips.

There’s a tight squeeze in my sex, a clench around nothing. “Why should?”

“Because I’ll kiss your breasts, sweetheart. Sutton will hold up your tits for me, and I’ll suck your nipples. You’d like that wouldn’t you? You’d come for me.”

Oh God. I close my eyes. “It’s not about me tonight.”

A soft laugh. This isn’t a man scared of what happens next. “It’s always been about you, Harper. Now push your panties aside. Do it, or I’ll fucking tear them.”

My fingers are somehow between my legs. The placket of my panties is already damp. I hook two fingers against it and push it aside. On the backs of my knuckles I feel the burn and velvet of Christopher's cock. Then he's pushing inside, opening me wide, making me moan.

A low masculine sound fills the room, and I have to open my eyes.

Christopher's expression is hard with pleasure, only an inch away from Sutton's face. It's like Christopher is fucking Sutton, with me in the middle. I'm a conduit right now, the thrust of hips and cock pushing me back against another body. Both of them rocking and grunting and using me in the most carnal ways.

At first it seemed like Sutton and I were the ones seducing Christopher.

Now it's the other way around. Sutton is the one being seduced.

He grasps my hips hard enough to leave bruises. "Ahh fuck," he says, his breath hot on my throat. "Fuck. Like that. Don't stop. Don't fucking stop."

His words spur Christopher to fuck me harder, and faster, and he doesn't stop.

Sutton's cock is only rubbing against my back, almost a juvenile comfort, but he sounds more turned on than I've ever seen. The most out of control. "Harper," he says, and it sounds like he's dying.

"Don't talk to her," Christopher says, baring his teeth.

The words are confusing until I feel Sutton buck against me. He likes being warned away. He called it *fucked up* and I think he's right about that. This isn't a normal kind of lust. *Obsession.* I turn my face and place an open-mouth kiss on Sutton's cheek.

A hand grasps my face and turns me back. "Me," Christopher says, almost primitive now. "You look at me. You fuck me. That's what you want, isn't it? Say it."

"I want you," I whisper, but I'm not giving in all the way. He made me work too hard to get his attention. He made me wait too long for even a speck of sexual interest.

He punctuates each of his words with a hard thrust. "You. Want. Me."

I close my eyes, but he doesn't let me keep them that way. A little shake. A particularly hard, angled thrust that makes me squirm against Sutton. His whole body turns taut behind me.

“Harper,” Christopher says, but his voice doesn’t sound as hard as before. He seems a little breathless. On the edge of something he can’t quite hold back.

His fingers work their way down my stomach, into the slick space between us.

The press together around me clit, and I shoot up toward him. “Please.”

An unsteady laugh. “You were right,” he says, except he isn’t talking to me. He’s talking to the man behind me. “She is too tight. Are you going to help her?”

Sutton reaches around to stroke my breasts. To pinch my nipples.

To hold up my tits, the way Christopher said he would.

The warmth of Christopher’s mouth makes me cry out and clench hard. His lips are only an inch away from Sutton’s fingers. His chin is probably brushing him. Christopher closes his eyes in pure ecstasy, and I want to watch, I do, but he sucks, and I have to throw my head back onto Sutton’s shoulder and moan in sensory overload.

Christopher moves to my other breast, flicking his tongue against me. Sutton doesn’t hold me up for him this time. Instead he reaches a hand up to stroke down Christopher’s temple, the gesture so tender it makes my eyes prick with tears. And I think we should talk, we should; except Christopher pinches hard around my clit, and then I’m coming, coming, bearing down on Christopher’s cock, making him gasp and hold me tight, Sutton behind us moaning, *yes yes yes* as a warm spot spreads across my back.

IN THE AFTERMATH I mostly expect for Sutton to disappear. That’s what he did after the poker game, and he was a lot less exposed then. *I can’t do this*, he’ll say, and leave the house. Except he sits on the edge of the bed, looking shaken.

It’s Christopher who stands and puts his clothes back on. There is no visit to the bar to get us drinks this time around. He doesn’t have some kind of post-sex bartender habit after all. Instead he seems actually pissed, which makes my stomach feel upside down.

“Christopher?” I say, my voice tremulous.

“Don’t.”

That makes me want to push harder. “Christopher, don’t be mad at Sutton. It was my idea. This whole thing was my idea. I don’t think Sutton even liked it to be honest—”

“That’s you being honest?”

I fall silent, acutely aware of the damp spot on my back, the proof of how much Sutton liked it. “You liked it too,” I finally say, pulling the sheet over my lap as a shield.

“Yes,” he says simply.

“Do you think that you’re—”

“Gay?” Christopher asks. “No, sweetheart. I like your pussy too much for that.”

“It’s possible to be bi.”

“Is this sex education night at the St. Claire household? I know what it means to be bi. And I know what it means to be straight. I’m not really any of those things. I’m wasted over a single person, Harper. Over you.”

Goose bumps rise on my skin. *Over you.* I want to believe him, but it’s hard to be joyful when it looks like Sutton is crushed. When it looks like he’s questioning his sexuality. “You never said that to me.” It pisses me off, suddenly. “Why didn’t you ever say that to me?”

“Because it wasn’t something I could buy,” he says, his voice grim. “And that’s on me, for wasting the time I should have been with you. For letting you be with Sutton.”

My eyes narrow. “For letting me? You don’t own me, Christopher.”

He doesn’t argue the point, but he doesn’t agree either. “You aren’t gay,” Christopher says, his voice thoughtful now. He looks at Sutton as if seeing him for the first time.

“So how do you explain what just happened?”

“Harper happened. It doesn’t have to mean anything.”

“That’s the problem,” Sutton says, his voice hard. “Maybe I want it to.” He stands and leaves the room, grabbing his jeans as he goes. The space he sat on the bed is still depressed from his hard, muscled weight. There’s no filling the space where he’s been.

Christopher meets my gaze. “I’m done sharing you.”

There’s an ache in my chest. If he’s done sharing me, does that mean he’s done *having* me? I’m not sure if Sutton and I are a package deal.

“What does that mean?”

“Ask him about the library,” he says, ominous.

“You’re leaving?”

“I think he needs you more. Tonight.”

I follow him down the stairs and watch him pull out of the driveway. Sutton comes to stand beside me, watching the corner where the red taillights disappeared. He looks broken, and I feel bad asking him when he’s like this but I have to know. “The library.”

He sounds almost absentminded. “What about it?”

“The foundation issues. The termites. The plumbing. Is it really fixable?”

“I said it was, Harper.”

“So you’re telling me the truth?”

Sutton looks behind us at the house. I’m not sure what he sees. Does he recognize the *Gone with the Wind* columns? Or does he only see a place with pumpkin-carved cocks and cookies inside? “Honest to a fault,” he finally says. “That’s me.”

Then he lopes to his car, moving slowly like someone who’s been delivered some fatal blow. As if Gold Rush kicked him in the ribs the last time I went, except I know he was uninjured only a few hours ago.

Sutton may have meant to push Christopher to his breaking point, but I think he found his own instead. He doesn’t look back as he gets into his car and drives away. Only when I’m standing alone in the lightening sky does it feel like I might never see him again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

DEATH PLAN

"GRAHAM." MY MOTHER'S voice is thin as paper, as wavery as the wind.

I stroke her hair and she quiets. I came in to check on her after the men left, and she seemed fine. This morning everything changed. She barely woke up when I spoke to her, even though she's always been an early riser, doing her sun salutations every morning with a yoga mat on the porch. Her sessions have been shorter and shorter, but this morning she doesn't even get out of bed.

Guilt suffuses me as if somehow she's doing worse because I had such a great orgasm bent over the couch downstairs with Sutton last night. I don't know if the universe really works on such a terrible balance sheet, but if I learned anything from Daddy, it's that if you're losing, someone else is winning.

Mom shifts in her uneasy nap, her skin flushed. It seems unfair that she should still dream about Daddy when he humiliated her at the end. He knew the society wives would shun her after being publicly left out of his will. And here she is, missing him and in pain—I suppose those are the same things.

"Don't go, Graham. Don't."

A sharp pain in my heart. "Mom," I whisper. "Wake up."

Except I don't want her to wake up before it's time to give her another dose of meds. That was the only prescription she accepted from the doctors. They couldn't save her life, and right now they can't even keep her comfortable. The nurse showed up this morning and checked Mom's vitals, but I sent her back downstairs. If she's going to be hurting, the least I can do is sit with her.

A low moan comes from her throat, and she thrashes weakly in the thousand-count bedsheets. Not even money will save us in the end. I bend

down low, murmuring in her ear, “He’s not going anywhere, Mom. He loves you. He’s right here, and he loves you.”

Sometimes the truth isn’t going to help you. Only lies will do that.

Her brow smooths out, and her breathing becomes even again. She’s drifting off to sleep, but I keep running my hand over her hair. It feels light somehow, as if she’s made of air, as if she’ll blow away if I don’t hold her here.

I must fall asleep because at a sudden sound I wake up. For a second, with one foot still in dreams, the other in a bleak reality, I think it’s Christopher knocking on the door. Relief is cool and sweet through my body, a cube of ice at the base of my throat on a hot summer day. Then I realize it’s not Christopher. There’s no one at the door. It’s my mother coughing, groaning—a terrible rattling sound that makes my heart beat double time. “Mom?”

There’s no response, and I shake her, hard, too hard, need her to answer. “Mom! Wake up! I need you to wake up right now.” I’m crying because the terrible sound doesn’t stop, the rasping precursor to death. I knew this was coming. I should have been prepared for this, but I’m not. I’m not.

I’ll never be ready to lose her.

I stare blankly at the still form under the covers, the sound of her sawing breath like a blade against my heart. The realization comes to me slowly, that she won’t die this second. Or the next. The panic fades to a dull ache of grief. My hands are shaking as I find my cell phone in the mess of blankets, still warm from where I’d been sleeping, rumpled from where I’d startled awake.

The nurse is only downstairs, probably preparing a light lunch that my mother will never eat. In the same house, but I don’t think I could yell for her. I can barely speak into my phone when she answers. “I think it’s time.”

The ambulance arrives without its lights flashing. This isn’t an emergency. This has been painstakingly prepared. This is the Death Plan. The one I never could bear to read.

I guess I’ll find out what it says.

Freida was right about that—I couldn’t avoid it forever. She stands with me, holding my hand while the EMTs move my mother’s still-breathing body onto the stretcher and into the ambulance. I follow them down the stairs, a cold sweat breaking out over my skin.

AVERY MEETS US at the hospital, which means Freida must have called her right after the ambulance. Part of the Death Plan, no doubt. The plan that's supposed to make this easy. Or at least, not hard.

She grasps me in a hard hug that I barely feel. I'm going numb, the tips of my fingers already gone, a frost spreading from the outside in. "I'm so sorry," she whispers, squeezing tighter. It would probably hurt, but I'm too far gone. "What can I do, sweetie? We're here for you."

That makes me look up, and I see that Gabriel is with her, looking stern and faintly sympathetic, a dark slash of suit against the sterile white hospital backdrop. He gives me a nod, which makes me want to punch him in the face. Does he know how much Avery worried while he was gone? He should just have a heart attack right now and spare her the agony of a slow death later.

I'm being totally irrational, and I break out into tears on the shoulder of my old friend. "I'm sorry," I gasp, clinging to her. "I didn't mean it. I don't want Gabriel to have a heart attack."

Gabriel coughs. "I appreciate that," he says, his voice grave.

"Do you want to go sit down?" Avery asks. "Gabriel will make sure your mom has everything she needs. You should take a little break."

I shake my head, eyes closed tight. "The hospital already has the Death Plan."

Avery pulls back, her hazel eyes searching and sympathetic, not even a little bit jarred by the words *Death Plan*. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Wait. Have you read the Death Plan?"

"Yes," she says, her voice overly reasonable. "I had a meeting with your mother."

"Is there a section titled *People To Console Harper*?"

"No." Her voice does a high-pitched thing at the end which means I hit close to the mark.

Footfalls approach from behind me, and I whirl around to face Sutton. He looks warm and empathetic, and I take a step back as he nears, bumping into Avery, afraid that he'll melt the ice around me, and then what would

happen? I would feel everything. All the pain. All the loss. Those blue eyes hold a wealth of understanding. “I can go if you want,” he says softly.

“No,” I say even though I don’t know what I want.

A good daughter would already know what’s on the Death Plan. I should have been the one to call the ambulance and gather everyone. A good daughter would have forgiven her mother for being terrible at love, even though I didn’t realize until this second how angry I was.

Why didn’t she make it work with my father? Why did she have to choose someone so rich and emotionally unavailable in the first place? Why couldn’t she ever settle down? Surely there was a man somewhere in the country who would have loved and cherished a beautiful woman, even if she would never be accepted by the rich society wives.

I had to experience love to understand the impossibility of it. I had to stumble so that I could forgive my mother for falling again and again. We don’t mean to; we don’t want to. The ground opens up underneath us, and there’s nowhere to go but down.

“Where is it?” I say, my voice shaky but sure.

Sutton looks concerned. “Where’s what?”

“The Death Plan. I need to see the Death Plan. I should have read it when she first asked me to, but it doesn’t matter. The important thing is that I read it now.”

A notch forms between Avery’s eyebrows. “You don’t need to worry about that,” she says in what I assume is a soothing tone. “Freida and the hospital have everything taken care of.”

“I still need to see it.”

There is a grace in accepting defeat that I haven’t acquired. I only know how to fight, how to protest, how to stage an event so big that an entire city bands together to save a library.

Right now I’m surrounded by the things my mother dislikes the most—the smell of antiseptic and doctors. Because she learned how to accept death with grace.

A piece of paper appears in front of me, a little crinkled from its journey, darkened spots appearing where my tears mar the ink. I struggle to hold it steady enough to read.

Now I understand how much bravery it took for her to write down what she wanted to feel, to hear, to see. Now I understand what it means to

surrender—not weakness but strength.

I swallow hard, turning away from Avery and Gabriel.

Turning away from Sutton.

“Thank you for coming,” I tell them because I feel an immense gratitude. And the incredible certainty that I’m going to be alone. “According to this we’ll be here for some time… waiting. You don’t have to wait here. I’m sure she didn’t want that.”

Which isn’t exactly what the Death Plan says.

“Harper.” Avery whispers my name, her voice pained.

She already knows what’s on the paper. My mother made sure that I wouldn’t be alone for this. She knows I love Avery like a sister. And she knows I have feelings for Sutton.

“I’m not leaving you here,” Sutton says because he doesn’t know.

My throat aches. “Most of her organs are torn up by the cancer. But her eyes are fine. She’s donating her corneas to someone who needs them.”

“It’s a good thing,” Avery says, but she doesn’t sound sure.

“It means she has to die in the hospital, because they have to remove them right away. So we have to stay here until it happens. It could take hours. Days. Weeks.”

“Jesus, Harper.” Sutton sounds angry, which strikes me as odd. Nothing much makes him angry, except maybe loving Christopher. “She’s going to make you watch her die?”

That makes me turn to look at him, a sad smile turning my lips. “What do you think I’ve been doing? It started before I even came to Tanglewood, before I even saw the library—the cancer that would kill her. There was only one way for this to end.”

The Death Plan requests the presence of Avery, of course.

And my friend Bea, who won’t come because she can’t.

It requests the presence of Sutton, who played gin over milk and cookies. These are all the people I love. And right there in black-and-white—Christopher Bardot, the man my father used to hurt her. Only now, as I stand in the overbright hospital hallway, do I fully realize what it cost her. Only now do I realize what she spent.

My mother’s in that hospital bed. It’s my personal rock bottom. I’m lying at the bottom of a pond, looking up at my reflection. And there’s only one face I see.

One person I want by my side at the hardest moment of my life. He isn’t here.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

VITAL SIGNS

THE *BEEP-BEEP-BEEP* OF the machines drills into my head. It sinks into my soul until all I hear is the sound of beeping when I remember doing yoga with my mom in the mornings before school. Beeping when we watched old movies together. Beeping when I called her from Daddy's yacht and told her about Christopher for the first time. *Don't get too close,* she told me then. *It's only temporary.* I'm bloodshot by the time morning comes, splashing my face with water so I can see straight.

"Didn't you get any sleep?" Avery asks, gently admonishing. Gabriel insisted she go home at midnight, and I supported that. There was no reason everyone should have insistent beeps playing on a loop in their overtired brains, even when they go to the bathroom where it's quiet.

She bustles around with a calm I can only admire, setting down a fresh coffee in front of me. Picking up the ten thousand pieces of Styrofoam that I pulled apart from my last coffee.

She cared for her father when he was hurt.

"How did you do it?" I ask.

"The same way you are," she says. "I was strong when I had to be."

Except she also had to worry about paying the bills. And about someone wanting revenge on her family. About selling her virginity to the highest bidder. *God.* My problems are small in comparison, but looking at my mother in that hospital bed, so frail and tied up with tubes and wires she never wanted, I feel like I'm falling apart. "I don't feel strong."

A hand covers mine, squeezing softly. "It never feels that way when you're in it. And then you come out the other side and you realize that you survived."

"You mean when my mother's dead. That's what the other side looks like."

Her face falls. “I’m sorry.”

“No.” I turn my hand over to grasp hers. “I’m stressed, but I shouldn’t take it out on you.”

She’s only trying to console me, but I won’t let myself be consoled. I *can’t* let myself be consoled at a time like this, because the pain is the only thing keeping me grounded right now.

There’s a small voice in my head that says I’m more like my father than I ever want to admit. When things got hard, he left his wife and found a new one. He shipped his daughter back to boarding school. And he pushed away his wife and his daughter in his will. I’m sitting here in this cold, sterile room, and I don’t know what the easy way out looks like right now—but the weak part of me wants it.

A nurse comes into the room, checks vital signs and adds a bag to the IV drip, her smile taut with the knowledge that there’s nothing she can really do. We’re all just waiting for someone to die so we can harvest her eyeballs. That’s the grim reality of the Death Plan.

“When did Gabriel get back?” I ask because I feel like lashing out.

Because I can hurt my friend as much as I can hurt myself. She flinches. “A couple nights ago. I didn’t want you to worry about me. You have enough going on.”

There’s a fracture in my heart. The hard stone is only a casing, and once it cracks, I’m back to being fully human. Fully vulnerable. “Oh, Avery. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t,” she whispers, fierce in her loyalty. That’s Avery to the end.

“I should go punch him in the face. That’s what I bring to the table. A fight. Except I don’t know how to swing at a hungry cancer cell that’s eating my mother. I don’t know how to punish myself for being alive when she’s so close to dying.

“You definitely shouldn’t punch him in the face,” she says with a sigh. “I just wish I knew what he wanted. He’s right there, standing probably a few feet from the door, but he’s so far away.”

I rub my eyes, but they’re filled with grit. “I know this is going to sound dumb but… did you ask him what the problem is? Like really ask him?”

“Yes,” she says, but the word is drawn out as if maybe she didn’t.

That makes me set down the cup of coffee. “Avery.”

She looks guilty. “I *did* ask him, okay? I ask him almost every day over the phone if anything is bothering him, and he says *no*, or *just work*, or *is there something on your mind, Avery?* But then I’m afraid to say yes, afraid to push him that much farther, because what if I don’t like what comes next?” Her voice drops to a whisper. “What if that’s the end of us?”

Her hazel eyes are so hopeful, as if I might have the answer, but I’ve never been able to say things with words. That’s why the library is both my foil and my greatest ambition, the thing just out of reach. “You know the first thing I learned as an artist?”

“That you’re brilliant?”

“Hah. No. I had to learn about colors before I could make anything with them. If you want to make a color brighter, you put it next to its complementary color, its opposite on the color wheel. It doesn’t actually change the color, but it looks that way.”

“The fact that Gabriel and I worked well together was just an optical illusion?”

“But if you mix those complementary colors together, they create the darkest shadows.”

She scrunches her nose. “Please tell me this analogy isn’t about sex.”

“Of course it’s about sex. Art is always about sex. That’s the second thing I learned as an artist.”

“Only the second thing? Didn’t you get into an exclusive summer program at the Harvard Art School when you were in middle school?”

“And I had this crush on Mr. Mendocino that gave me quite an education. The important thing is that complementary colors don’t want to mix together. They want to be next to each other.”

“You’re saying that Gabriel is pulling back because we’re getting too close?”

“No, Avery. I’m saying *you* are. You’re determined to find something wrong, and I think it’s because you’re scared. Of what, I have no idea. He’s a dangerous bastard, sure, but you knew that when he bid on your virginity, and you still fell in love with him.”

Her eyes go bright with tears. “I do love him.”

“I know,” I say softly because I know she would do anything for the man standing outside. And he would do anything for her, including drive

her to the hospital at five a.m. in the morning after leaving only a few hours before that. “What are you afraid of, Avery?”

“My dissertation is finished.”

“Oh. That’s good, right?”

“It’s been finished. I told everyone I was taking the semester away from school to work on it, but it was done before I left. It was one thing to do the long-distance, constant-travel thing while I was in school, but Gabriel has a condo in Hong Kong and a building in Dubai, in addition to his mansion in Tanglewood. There are a million places he needs to be, but none of them are in a sleepy, snooty college town.”

“Why would you be in a college town—Oh. You want to teach?”

“I don’t have official offers right now, of course, but my advisor at Smith College is already begging me to stay. And I advised on this grant about Feminism and Families in the Trojan War at Berkley, and I would love to work with them.”

“Oh, Avery. Do you think Gabriel wouldn’t follow you there?”

“He would.”

“Then what’s the problem.”

“That’s just it. He would follow me someplace that isn’t good for him, that wouldn’t make him happy. And how do I know that? Because he isn’t happy now, and he isn’t telling me. What kind of future is that? Him getting quieter and quieter while I traipse around academia, doing whatever I want?”

“Honestly I love that you can call writing ten thousand pages on mythological ovaries *traipsing*, but I think you really need to talk to Gabriel. What if it’s actually his greatest dream to live in a snooty college town, wearing a black turtleneck and sipping espresso with his pinky finger up?” At her dubious look, I say, “Okay, probably not. But I still think you should talk to him.”

“I’ll think about it,” she says, but that probably means she’s going to stare at him and sigh over him and then sacrifice what she loves so she can be with him. It’s almost enough to make me mad, but the truth is, I don’t know the answer. What if two people love each other but they want different things? What if love is nothing but an endless wheel of compromise?

What if they mix and mix and mix until both of them are shadows of their former selves?

I grab the chart at the foot of the hospital bed and flip to an empty page, scribbling down some notes. “Can you go home and get this stuff from the house? I need a change of clothes.”

There’s more than clothes on the list. A portable speaker. The latest copy of Mom’s meditation magazine. All of it might actually get used in the next few hours, but that isn’t the only reason I’m sending her. I need the steady *beep-beep-beep* as much as I despise it. I’m going insane in this room, a fast and efficient one-way trip to despair, and I don’t need company for the ride. At least not in the form of a sweet, steady friend.

I wait until she’s gone before I pull out my cell phone.

Christopher does not answer his phone.

“It’s me,” I say to a thousand volts of mindless electricity. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to be doing here. How does it feel like my heart is being burned right here in my chest, on fire, but I’m not doing anything but sitting here? I need you to… God, Christopher. I just need you. Where are you? Why won’t you come?”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE GIRL CODE

THERE'S A COMMOTION in the hallway, and I close my eyes to shut it out. It doesn't go away, though; it gets louder. Voices filter through the fog in my head like rays of too-bright sun.

"The ER is downstairs!"

"She's not here to see a doctor," says a haggard voice in a smooth accent I recognize. "She's here to visit someone. Room three hundred forty-two."

That's where I'm sitting, except why would Hugo have come with Bea? Oh God. I rush into the hallway in time to see my good friend retch into a waste bin. "I'm fine," she mumbles, clearly miserable. And very pregnant. "Ignore me. I'm fine."

"Oh my God." I lean down to stroke her red hair. "I hate you right now. I can't believe you left the hotel for this. You shouldn't have, but I love you."

She laughs weakly. "I thought I could make it."

Beatrix Cartwright has been severely agoraphobic since the death of her parents over a decade ago, not even leaving the penthouse hotel where she practically raised herself ever since. She's been making strides lately—short visits to the Den, to the museum, to a park. Those required a great deal of planning, not a phone call in the middle of the night.

Her usually pale skin has turned a deathly white with a faint greenish tinge. Her eyes are wide in her face when she looks up at me. I suspect her current state has way more to do with being out of her home so unexpectedly, but it can't be good for her. "I'm so sorry," she says.

I think she's apologizing for my mother's condition, but I'm not ready to deal with that, so I pretend it's still about throwing up. "Nonsense. Hugo

is the one who should be sorry. I can't believe he let you leave in this condition."

Hugo Bellmont is perpetually cool and effortlessly suave pretty much every time I've met him, but he looks frayed at the edges for maybe the first time ever. His hair is all out of place, his shirt wrinkled. Lines of stress bracket his mouth. "She insisted," he says, and in the hoarseness of his voice I hear every argument he must have made to her.

"I'm glad you're here," I say, and as I say it, I realize it's true. Part of me wants to shove my head into the ground, but that's the cowardly part. The stronger side of me wants my friends to help me through this. "Come inside the room. If you throw up again I'll hold your hair back."

I help her inside, where she looks at my mother's still form on the hospital bed with such a severe expression that I wonder if she's going to throw up again. She must be remembering her own mother. The plane crash. "My God," I whisper. "Was your last memory at the hospital?"

"Close," Hugo says, his expression grim.

"I'm completely fine," Bea says, her voice weak and very much *not* fine. It's only a testament to her loyalty as a friend that she's holding it together, but I feel the fine tremors shake her where I'm helping her stand.

"Sit down at least." The gray cloth chair has questionable stains and is probably permanently molded into the shape of my ass, but at least she stops swaying when she's there.

Hugo kneels down beside her, a look of worry on his handsome, angular face. There's nothing of the seducer in him now. He looks elemental, all the walls he's built up torn down to reveal a love so raw it hurts to look at it. "Rest, *ma belle*. We're here now, so you can rest for a moment."

"You must be dehydrated." The last inch of coffee in my Styrofoam turned cold and lumpy a while ago. "Sutton went down to the gift shop in search of food a few minutes ago. I'm sure he'll come back with a water bottle or something, or we can send him out again."

Sutton will know how to fix this. That's what he's done for me the past few hours, for the whole time I've known him—found the sharp points in my world and smoothed them down. There's a sense that I'm coasting along in this calm new landscape, closing my eyes as the wind hits my face, blind to the dangers around me.

It’s a relief after facing off with a man who turned every edge into a blade.

Bea faced a severe anxiety attack in order to be by my side, and even though I would have told her not to come, I’m touched. In contrast Christopher Bardot cannot even be moved to answer his phone. *Sorry about missing the Death Plan*, he could have sent in a text message, like a sad RSVP to a party he wouldn’t be attending.

Instead there’s only a ringing silence.

Hugo looks pained. “That’s the reason she insisted on coming here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Bea says, her green eyes filled with regret. “I know it violates the man code but I couldn’t break the girl code, and you really needed to know.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The library,” Hugo says.

Bea grimaces. “It’s never going to be fixed. Sutton lied about that. Maybe he was doing it to protect you. Or maybe he did it for… other reasons. But the construction crew that’s there isn’t going to be able to salvage it. It’s not even safe to be inside.”

The words don’t make sense. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” Hugo says. “He feels bad about it.”

“Not bad enough to tell her the truth,” Bea says in an arch tone that sounds more like herself than she has in the past few minutes. There’s a little pink in her cheeks, too. Indignation looks good on her, but I’m still stuck on the word *lied.*

“Sutton lied to me?”

There’s a scuffing sound from behind me, the sole of a shoe against the large square tiles underfoot, and I turn to see Sutton in the doorway, a large paper bag in one hand, a balloon with roses on it trailing behind him in the hallway, bobbing uselessly in the air-conditioner draft.

“Perhaps we should leave them alone,” Hugo says, sounding somehow both guilty and accusing. I suppose I should be glad he was willing to defy his friendship in order to tell me the truth, but it feels a little too late—kind of like me reading the Death Plan.

“I’m staying right here,” Bea says, but she’s completely green now.

“Please go home,” I tell her fervently. “I’m only going to worry about you if you stay. And I’m pretty sure Hugo is about to have a stress

aneurysm.”

She presses her hand to her mouth, eyes squeezes shut. “Honestly. Yes. Okay.”

Hugo looks immensely relieved as they give me a hug and kiss to say goodbye. Then I’m left alone in the room with the man I can’t quite look in the eye. I’m not sure whether I’m mad at him. Yes, I decide. I would be mad if I had any energy in my body to feel things.

“Why didn’t you tell me the truth?” I ask, but the question feels far away.

“Would you have let me stay if I had?”

I shake my head, but it’s not really an answer. It’s too hard to think in this room with people, even if it’s just one person. One person I shared my body with. Maybe even my heart, but never fully my trust. Maybe I knew Christopher was telling the truth about the library.

There’s only one man I’ve ever really trusted, even though I shouldn’t. I’m not sure if that makes me foolish or in love. Is there even a difference? I love Christopher, but like my mother’s love for my father, it doesn’t mean anything good. Love is a chain around my ankle. It’s an anchor bearing me to the bottom of the ocean.

It’s this feeling of brokenness as I watch my mother die.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

PROTESTING

SHE WAKES UP so calm and casual it's like nothing is wrong. "Harper."

There's a lurch in my throat, and I can taste stale coffee and hope. "Mom! You're awake. Let me call the nurse. Are you in pain? Are you hungry?"

"No—Harper, wait. I don't need anything."

My stomach sinks. "What can I do?"

"Can you just…?" She blinks, a little too fast to be normal. "I lied about the plan. About being okay with everything. I'm afraid, baby, but it doesn't hurt anymore."

Tears leak down my face. There's no pantry or closet to hide in. No pillow to scream my pain into. There's only her thin body to hold, and she holds me back, her hands shaking.

"I was—" She pauses, seeming to struggle to find the words. "I was looking up. With your father I was looking up, and I could never walk again."

For a terrible moment I think she might be hallucinating, not really with me even though she seems clearer now than she has in months. Except I don't think she's hallucinating. She was looking up, like Deborah Kerr in the movie. She was hit by a car because she was so in love. What a cautionary tale, that movie. It had a happy ending, though.

Not like my mother's love life. "I'm so sorry," I whisper.

"Don't be—sorry." She grasps my hand, her head falling back, eyes closed. The distance widens between us, and I hold her tighter. "Love you. That's the plan."

And then she goes quiet.

The *beep beep beep* keeps going. No one rushes into the room, but there might as well be a ghost in the room with me. That's how quiet and still my

mother’s body is. That’s how lifeless she looks. There are a thousand cracks in my foundation, but this one is the deepest. I press my face into her body, into the warmth that isn’t quite alive, and cry.

The little squiggles on the machine bump up regularly enough, but that’s just electricity. Those are electrons firing inside a circuit. That’s not what makes my mother a person. That part is already gone, so it’s not a surprise when she starts breathing in a terrible sound that fills the room. A good thing, Freida says when she hears it. It means my mother is so relaxed that she can no longer be bothered to wake up. She is too relaxed to live. Can you imagine that?

That death is just the ultimate spa vacation, after all.

The afternoon sun presses hot against my neck, squeezing through the cheap white blinds on the window, marking my skin in a completely random place. The middle of the day seems like a strange time to die, but that’s when the horrible sound of her breathing stops.

When she’s so relaxed she leaves me completely alone, as if it had been so much effort to stay with me as long as she did. Every piece of art I’ve ever made flashes in front of me—empty, empty. There’s nothing to explain the hollowness of this room.

The hollowness of my heart.

All that protesting did not accomplish anything—I couldn’t save the library. I couldn’t save my mother. I hold her hand where it rests on the bed, and it’s still warm. A lie, because she’s gone. Her body is still. Her chest does not rise and fall.

Eventually the nurse comes and makes the machine stop beeping. She puts her hands on my shoulder, but she doesn’t insist that I leave. That must be part of the Death Plan, which suddenly strikes me as funny.

I start laughing, and then Christopher is there. “Harper,” he says.

“You’re a dream. You aren’t real.”

“I’m sorry,” he says, and it sounds like he means it. Like he’s really sorry that I’m alone, even though he’s the one who made me this way.

“Why didn’t you come?” I say, my words garbled by the grief in my throat, the tears in my eyes. The black in my heart. “You should have come. She asked you to. She wanted you to.”

“She didn’t,” he says with a sigh that is a thousand years old.

I hit his chest with my fists, but he may as well be made of granite. Granite like his eyes. Black and hard and cold. “I hate you. I hate you. I hate you.”

He lets me hit him until I collapse. His arms are around me, and I shatter.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

INEVITABLE

THE HOUSE IS dark when Christopher's car pulls into the drive. How many times have I come here after working late in the library? I shouldn't have been in the library, though. It wasn't safe, which feels ridiculous right now. Who cares about safety? Death is inevitable.

I'm Scarlett come home after the war, the place a husk of its former self. The walls aren't blackened with fire, but they might as well be. The house rings hollow.

Christopher puts me to bed with gentle insistence, undressing me like I'm a child. I press my face into his chest and breathe deep, taking comfort I don't deserve from his scent. My mouth opens to taste him, to bite him. I would swallow him whole if I could, but he sets me back an inch. "Not tonight," he says, and I hiss at him like an animal.

"Yes, tonight." This is when I need him—rough and animalistic. If he won't hurt me then I'll hurt him. It's the only thing that makes sense in this topsy turvy night. It's the only thing I can trust.

I grasp his shirt and press myself against him, my lips mashing his. It's isn't graceful or seductive. There's a violence inside me that needs to get out. I bite at his lips, but it seems to work. It seems to work because his breath catches. His body goes stock still—not in the way where he's fighting me.

He's still in the way where he's fighting himself.

I give him a rough shove, and he lets himself step back. "Fight me," I say, panting.

A low growl. "You don't want this."

I want it to stop hurting inside me, and maybe if he hits me, maybe if he hurts me, I won't be able to feel the ache on the inside anymore. All I need

is one minute of relief. All I need is one minute to forget. I step forward and raise my hand—he catches my wrist.

His face is in an inch from mine. “You don’t want this,” he says again, but this time it doesn’t sound like concern for me. It sounds like a threat, and my body responds with a rush of adrenaline. My heart pounds ten thousand seconds in the time it takes him to let me go.

And then I’m on him, climbing his body, knocking him to the floor. He cushions my fall with his body, his grunt half pain, half pleasure. I scratch my nails down his chest, and even through the fabric of his shirt I know I’ve drawn blood. A sound escapes me—something angry and grieving and wild.

He should be scared of me right now. I’m a little scared of this. God knows Sutton would be; he only ever treated me like a lady. Skittish like his beautiful golden horse, but a lady nonetheless.

Nothing about this is ladylike. It’s not even human, this grief inside me.

Christopher doesn’t look shocked. He looks at me like I’m the same as always, like he always knew that I’m a she-devil, a siren. A mythical creature with eyes that will turn a mortal man to stone.

He isn’t mortal. He burns under my gaze. “Go ahead,” he says from the floor, leaning back, offering up his body to me. “Take what you need. Let me give it to you.”

The words should be enough to jolt me back to sanity, but I’m too far gone. I gasp him everywhere, everywhere, my nails raking him, my teeth bared to him. He pushes his hands above his head on the floor, as if they’re chained there. As if he’s Prometheus and I’m the fury of the gods, torturing him until the end of time. And he likes it. He likes it.

I rock my hips over the hardness pressing his jeans. He jerks against me, unable to hold still at the heat of my covered sex, at the rock of my body, even though he accepted my pain in silence.

My head falls back, and I close my eyes. It’s like water to let my hips move over him, liquid movement, the path of least resistance to rub my clit against his erection. Pleasure arcs through my body, sharp through the muted agony. It’s almost unbearable, the friction too much. I make myself feel it, and my climax rises with an overwhelming hurt that comes from deep inside. I rock and rock and rock—and against him with a terrible cry and tears streaming down my cheeks.

It fills my head, the knowledge that I will never see her again. We'll never watch an old movie. She'll never tell me that I'm strong and brave and good, because I'm not, I can't be. I collapse on Christoper's battered chest, sobbing salt-tears into his cuts.

His arms come around me, and he soothes me with nonsense words, with soft caresses. I know with certainty then that no frat boy, no other man could have withstood me. Only this man, more god than human. He absorbs all my grief and pain into his body, and I know he's strong enough for more.

I cry against him for what I've lost, but more than that I cry for what was never found.

For the love my mother never had. For the peace and security in those black-and-white movies that never came true—and now they never can come true. She'll never know how it feels to be held forever.

And the worst part is, Daddy never knew it either.

They could have been everything together. Instead they were nothing.

The fabric beneath my cheek is drenched in tears. The floor hard beneath my knees. Through my tears I come to realize that we're lying on the floor, my body draped over Christopher's, his cock still hard between my legs. "I'm sorry," I mumble, reaching for him, fumbling. "Sorry."

I'm not sure what I can offer him with my heart still broken, not sure why he's even still aroused when my eyes are red and puffy like this, but he stops me with a sharp sound.

"Absolutely not." His voice is rough with need, but his tone leaves no room for argument. As if we can't cross some invisible line of sexual ethics that says I'm allowed to rub myself off on his body, but he himself can't come. It's ridiculous, especially when he's throbbing the inside of my thigh. He must be in pain. But then he pulls me down to his body again, pushes my head on his shoulder. I sink into the cradle of his body. That's all I needed—an orgasm, fast and rough. A forceful cuddle. And sleep claims me, dragging me down into the inky black.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TROPHY

WHEN I WAKE up again, it's the middle of the night.

Christopher's face looks softer in the moonlight. This man has been jerked around by my family, his life twisting at our whims. First my father's will and then my mother's Death Plan. He's so beautiful and tortured. Maybe the best thing I can do is finally leave him alone.

Last night feels like a dream.

The only thing I know for sure is that I can't stay in this house.

I'm half asleep as I find my keys and head out the door—without my purse or my phone. I don't need those things, not for what I need to do. Not for where I need to go. Isn't that what a library used to be? A place where you didn't need money to read. Where you didn't need the newest, biggest iPhone to learn something about the world.

An outdated idea. A defunct building. The world still needs books and knowledge, but it's not going to get them here at the long-closed Tanglewood Library.

There's no saving it.

No saving me.

The library looks almost sinister in the moonlight with its rough planes and jagged edges. The girl stands at the corner, selling her body. She's breaking apart, just like the building. I should give her whatever cash is in my wallet—except I didn't bring my purse. There's nothing but my hands now. That's all I ever had, the ability to create. The ability to destroy.

Harper St. Claire distilled down into a single goal.

She gives me a strange look, a little concerned, mostly wary. Like an alley cat I've disturbed in the middle of her dinner. "What are you doing here?" she spits.

"What is anyone doing here?"

“I’m trying to stay alive.”

“Same, girl. Same.” I don’t have a death wish; I never did. I want to stay alive, to *feel* alive, and there are only two things that have ever done that—Christopher and art. I’m in a destructive mood, and I’ve already torn up his chest, so now it will have to be art.

Not anything as clean and pure as *creating* art.

Tonight is about falling off a yacht.

“You don’t know anything about what I have to do to survive.” Something in her reminds me of me with Christopher—defensive, because she’s been hurt before. Because people who’ve been hurt like knowing it will happen again. There’s comfort in the familiar.

“You’re right,” I say, because the library isn’t going to help. What is it a monument to except for the way things used to be? For the patriarchy and the goddamn men who keep this girl on her knees instead of building and creating and living without fear.

She disappears around the corner, leaving me on the sidewalk.

It’s easy enough to slip through the temporary barriers. The wall seems more majestic at night. A beautiful lie, because it will never survive what comes next. I’m furious that it let me believe, even for a moment. Part of me knows I’m not thinking straight, but the other part is sure that’s a good thing. I’ve had too much straight thinking. Tonight I’m all the way twisted.

The ladders are propped against the sides of the library. The scaffolding stands where I can reach it, but I need something more than height and clay tonight.

Out back there are vehicles the construction crew leaves behind. Most of the tools are stored in a white van, which is locked. This isn’t a safe neighborhood after all. Luckily I learned some very bad things over the years, including how to pick a lock. With a bent wire hanger in the doors at the back, I manage to get it open.

I have my pick of weapons—a shovel. A crowbar. Yes, that will work.

It’s almost too easy to climb onto the scaffolding that’s waiting for me at the back of the library. I plunge the sharp end of the crowbar into the crack and lever my whole body, throwing my weight against the iron. Wood splits with a satisfying *thwak*.

I keep breaking the wall until my hair is full of wood shards.

Thwak.

Keep fighting the wood until it comes apart.

Thwak.

I lose track of time doing this, lose track of my limbs and muscles. Lose track of my thoughts. Even so it's not quite a surprise when I feel the metal beneath my feet shiver. Christopher climbs onto the scaffold with me, but I ignore him. There are splinters in my hands. I only feel them when he pries the bar from me.

"Look what you've done," he murmurs, smoothing a thumb over my bloodied palm.

I swallow the pain. "Better me than you."

He swears softly. "Is this what I've done to you?"

"No,' I say, but that feels like a lie. It's made me feel crazy to love a man who won't love me back. To have him look at me like he's burning alive for me, only for him to push me away.

"Come with me."

"But—" I want to keep going until the building comes down on me. Isn't that what everyone said would happen? Without a yellow hard hat on my head. I would buried.

I want to be buried right now.

Christopher doesn't take me back to the *Gone with the Wind* house.

Instead we pull up at a contemporary home making angles over a sloping hill. I step inside and stare dully at the large piece of rubble with Cleopatra's eye. It doesn't seem strange that he should have it. Of course he paid some exorbitant amount of money online. Lord knows he made much more money from the deal than that.

It's a trophy.

"Why do you have that?"

"It took some convincing to get the buyer to part with it."

"I don't understand."

"You take that crow bar to me, if that's what you need to do. It's my skin you wanted to break open, and God, you have every right to do that. I never should have closed myself to you."

I can't hold onto the anger. It slips through my fingers, leaving only the grief. I would rather be fighting the wall, becoming bloody and hurt. I'd rather anything than this terrible emptiness. "This is another game. Another

conquest. Another way to make me love you and then push me away. I won't survive it, Christopher."

"You'll survive anything," he says, a little sadly. "Even the terrible way I love you."

My breath catches. I want to argue with him, but part of me always knew it. "I hate you. I hate you." The words blur together, and then I'm crying. The words change. "I love you."

He leads me farther into the house, and I stop in front of a fireplace almost large enough to stand in. And above it there's the Medusa I painted from the art show all those years ago.

"I should have made you mine then, Harper. You *were* mine, even then."

He lowers his lips to mine, and I tilt my head up to meet him. I'm done fighting this, done destroying things, done making trophies for him to collect. And I know that he won't push me away again, not because he'll never retreat. Because I won't let him. I'm not only a woman. I'm a she-devil. A siren. A mythical creature, except I'm the one who's been made of stone. And he's the man who turns me into flesh and blood.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

DESTRUCTION

THE WRECKING BALL slams into the building, the sound deafening.

Dust rises around us, stinging my eyes. I'm not happy about the destruction. It feels a little like death, but sometimes you need to die so you can start over again. There's a crowd behind us—our friends, Bea and Hugo. Avery and Gabriel.

There's a community behind us.

Christopher squeezes my hand. "Are you okay?" he asks, though it's less of a sound with the rumble still falling in front of us and a hard hat obscuring my hearing. It's the only way he let me within two miles of the construction site today. It's more the way his lips move.

The whole thing is coming down, along with every hope I ever had for it, every wall I ever built around myself. Leaving room for something new. I nod to him, squeezing his hand back. "Because you're with me." He shouldn't be able to hear me either, but there's no mistaking the satisfaction in his onyx eyes. It's the same as when I wake up beside him in bed. The same as when I spread my legs above his mouth. Because he didn't only need to save me.

He needed me to save him, too.

I reach up on my tiptoes, and he obliged by bending down. Gentle, gentle, even though there's a wildness inside me, I tug at the lobe of his ear with my teeth. "Diabolical," I murmur, though he probably only feels a whisper of breath. "You wanted this all along."

And when he straightens, his eyes brim with the lazy pleasure of a man who's recently come, his body sated, his mind at ease. "Yes," he says, the word unmistakable.

My heart snags on something close to the surface.

Love, I think.

Through the cloud of destruction, you can make out vivid colors peeking through. Dust settles in slow degrees, the way a sun would set, crouching low to the ground and then gone. In its wake we have a full view of Christopher's luxury condo building, with its walls of glass along the ground floor and concrete above. A woman stands proud and unashamed of her breasts, her wings, her wild mane of hair. Lilith is a demon and a sex goddess—the heart of female defiance.

She was the first woman created, even before Eve, made from the same dirt as Adam. Was she cast out of the garden for disobedience? Or did she leave in search of greener pastures?

Is she a deviant pleasure-hungry whore?

Or is she simply a woman who wants freedom?

They are the same story, depending on who tells the tale.

And in my story, she finds her own garden, in the glorious foliage and flowers surrounding her. Because Freida was telling the truth. Death is a natural part of life. And like the burning of a field, this library will give rise to new birth.

There's more light now, with the building gone, and we'll need those rays of sun for the garden we're going to plan here. I can already see trees and bushes and flowers—but the painting against the wall will remain as the cornerstone. The beginning. It's my most ambitious work to date. And it wasn't completely a secret. It took me three weeks to paint the plants that curl up from the glass wall and hang down from giant illusory trees. It took that long with elaborate, very safe scaffolding and rope around my waist and a crew to prime the wall and seal it after.

It's only Lilith who came at the end, working at night, with only Christopher beside me. My arms feel like jelly after working for twelve hours straight. There's still paint smudged across my arms and shoved under my fingernails. Christopher doesn't look much better—there's specks of blue in his black hair from where I gripped it in a celebratory kiss, which turned into more, twenty feet above the ground on top of our large stable scaffold. There are faint lines under his eyes from being awake all night, but he looks live-wire and alert. Maybe watching for a threat since not everyone in the city is happy about the image of female empowerment painted on the building. Not everyone wants the west side to be restored. There are true demons that lurk these streets, but Lilith will help find them.

I saved her eyes for last, because they had to watch over the park. And they had to look out over the west side of Tanglewood. It's her domain, all of it. There will be a modern library worthy of Smith College. There will be a soup kitchen and a shelter so that young women have choices. That will be the practical side, the necessary side—and finally, the perfect use for my trust fund. I've always been a fan of grand gestures. Of symbolism.

Of proving to the world that women don't need to be meek to be beautiful—and that's why Lilith will remain standing throughout all of it.

I was wrong to think that we needed a structure to house her. She isn't afraid of the elements. Sometimes you need the darkness to shine. And sometimes you need death to come fully alive. Sunlight beams across the paint, drying her eyes. She looks on with a knowledge hard-won and peace that comes from finally finding home.

Thank you so much for reading THE EVOLUTION OF MAN!

I hope you loved the duet! This was a personal and painful story to write because of what happens with Harper's mother, but I'm so glad that I can share it with you. Harper's book was the most requested after she first appeared in THE PAWN, and now her story is complete.

If you're wondering what happened to Sutton, order MATING THEORY right now!

Billionaire Sutton Mayfair has nothing left to lose…

My best friend is getting married to the woman I love. They say the nice guy finishes last. So what's the point of being a goddamn gentleman?

Maybe I should take what I want.

Even that sexy little thing on the street corner.

She needs a hot meal and a place to sleep. Instead I'm taking her home to soothe the savage beast inside me. I was born a bastard, and for the first time in my life I act like one.

Except the more I use her, the more I need her.

I didn't know I had someone left to lose.

For a single heartbeat, I had her.

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* * *

TEARING THE MOLD off bread so I have something to eat.

A black eye on the first day of school. Two dollars to my name.

Rock bottom looks different every time, but it's never looked like an empty bottle of Jim Beam until tonight. My daddy told me I wasn't better than him, and I told him to go fuck himself. He punched me in the stomach, and I told him again. And again. And again, until I spit blood onto the worn gray carpet of our single-wide.

Always had more pride than sense, which I guess is how I ended up on top of a hollowed-out building. I'm surrounded by the biggest goddamn block party without a single drop to drink. Only Harper St. Claire could have turned the razing of a prized old building into a celebration.

Half the city showed up for the big demolition. They're dancing on the bones of that long-abandoned library, praying for a fresh harvest like it's a sacrifice.

Christopher and Harper, they're the gods in this ritual.

They're the ones we pray to.

A sound makes me tense. This may be a hollowed-out fucking building, but it's *my* hollowed-out fucking building. Some of the veneer that lets me wear a suit and smile and pretend I'm in control of myself has broken down. It crumbled along with the library when the wrecking ball crashed into it. There's only the feral part of me now, and my back's against the wall. I'm ready for a fight.

The rusted metal stairs creak and whine at someone's weight.

My skin ripples with awareness. I can almost imagine the hair on my back rising up like some kind of wild animal. I'm two seconds away from baring my teeth. You don't come near someone bleeding, even if the pain is only on the inside. Really fucking poetic, watching the two people I'm in love with end up with each other. Even from ten stories high I can see the way her eyes shine when she looks at him.

And I can see the way his body tightens when he looks at her.

A head appears over the rim of the building, blocking my view. The girl is hallowed by the spotlights on the street, her hair almost shimmering from the force of the light behind her. Or maybe it only looks that way because I'm wasted. "This roof's taken," I say, my voice hard. "Now fuck off."

She does not fuck off.

Instead I'm treated to the sight of backlit breasts and a slender silhouette as she climbs onto the roof. I made a chair out of an old radiator. Front row seats to heartbreak. Maybe she's one of Harper's friends from prep school. It might be a good time for her, watching me pant over what I can't have. She stretches her legs out in front of her, settling in beside me, using her warmth like a weapon against my numbness. "You excited about the park?" she says, her tone challenging.

"Hardly."

"It's going to revitalize the west side of Tanglewood." A spitfire, this girl. Her sarcasm so sharp I can feel it against my throat like a blade. "All the sad little poor people can finally see what a flower looks like. They'll have art and plants and magic, so who cares that they don't have food?"

Not a friend from prep school. Maybe she's some kind of do-gooder in Tanglewood, an activist, a volunteer, working with the poor. "Why are you at the groundbreaking for a park you don't want?"

"I could ask you the same question." She holds up my bottle to the sliver of orange sunset. It gleams empty. "How long have you been up here, anyway?"

I climbed those shaky metal stairs to the roof before the first crush of steel against concrete. The crowd gasped when the dust cleared, their eyes on the two-story painting revealed on the building behind. I was too busy watching the only two people I've ever loved share a private kiss on the scaffolding that serves as their temporary stage. And then drinking,

drinking, drinking. I'm not sure I could make it back down the stairs without breaking my neck, so I'm trapped here.

How long have you been up here, anyway? "It feels like a goddamn lifetime."

Her gaze follows mine. A woman throws her arms around a man's neck. He leans down to whisper in her ear. They could have been any couple in love. "Which one?" she says, her voice soft.

"Which one what?"

"Which one broke your heart?"

I couldn't describe the sledgehammer I'd taken to the brain when I met Christopher in a dimly lit private club. Too dark to be called lust or even love. Competitive and all-consuming. I couldn't describe the desire that slammed through me when I met his stepsister.

There was no way I could choose between them, but it had not been a choice. They wanted each other. Electricity crackled in the air whenever they were in the same room.

Well, I could be happy for them.

That's what a good man would do. A gentleman, and I've worked so fucking hard to pretend that's what I am. Until the liquor stripped my skin away. Until this girl sat beside me, asking which one broke my heart. She watches me with clear eyes, her gaze impossibly wise. What does she see?

"Both of them."

A sympathetic sound that feels like a stroke to my cock.

She doesn't look shocked that I fell for a man, even though it shocked the hell out of me. I questioned my sexuality, fought with it—lost myself to it. Wanting Harper did not diminish wanting Christopher.

There's something worldly in that dark gaze. Any other day I would find out what.

Tonight, I don't care. She isn't a person with wants and dreams and needs of her own. I'm going to use her body the same way they used mine. I'm going to take what they took from me.

"Your name," I say, though it doesn't really matter.

"Ashleigh." She sounds uncertain for the first time tonight, her name drawn out into two parts. *Ash*, like the soot in a fireplace. And *leigh*, *leigh*, *leigh*. She's beautiful, and I'm wasted.

“Come here, Ashleigh.” Except I don’t give her a chance to come here. She might use it to leave, to disappear down that metal staircase where I can’t follow.

My hand wraps behind her neck, pulling her close. My lips are harsh against hers, hungry and hard. I want to punish her for the emptiness inside me, except when she makes a little sound of fright, it fills me up with something else. Pleasure like black velvet, the kind of darkness I want to stroke my fingers over, back and forth, to feel the fibers pull against me.

Her shuddery breaths are like water, and I drink and drink. My tongue slides against hers. It’s a graphic act, this kiss. More obscene than actual sex could be. More invasive as I push her head back and explore her mouth, not waiting for permission, not leaving any place untouched.

I must taste like whiskey, but she doesn’t pull away.

I’m the one who breaks the kiss, panting hard. Liquid dark eyes stare up at me.

Surprise. More than that. There’s outright shock in her expression. Is she younger than I thought? More innocent than anyone I ever met? I should ask her about sex, but those aren’t the words that come out of my mouth. “Have you ever been in love, Ashleigh?”

A slow shake of her head. “No,” she whispers.

“Good. That’s good.”

“I can pretend.”

“What?”

“For a hundred dollars.”

There’s a drum in my head, pounding, pounding, telling me I’ve got something wrong. Really wrong. “A hundred dollars,” I repeat, wishing my veins weren’t running hot with liquor.

“For an hour. I know how much that suit costs. You can afford it.”

I pull back, moving careful so I don’t tip over. “What are you talking about?”

A cool breeze skates over us, and she shivers. I want to comfort her, but that’s not what this is about. A fast fuck on an abandoned rooftop while the sounds of a massive block party bounce off the buildings around us. And a hundred dollars, apparently. Jesus. I was about to fuck a prostitute.

What’s worse is that I still want to do it. More, because I know she’ll let me do anything.

For a price.

I fumble for my wallet, and she tenses. Maybe it's her first time selling that sweet little body? Except that worldliness in her eyes… it's not the first time. My cock is rock hard in my slacks. I pull out the wad of cash that's inside and press it into her hand without saying a word. A few hundred, I think. "Take it."

I want to use this girl, but I'm not going to use her like this.

She scoots herself back, only an inch. There's shame on her face. And hurt, like maybe this rejection matters even though I gave her money.

"I should go," she says, not quite meeting my eyes.

"This roof's taken," I remind her, gently this time.

I don't tell her to *fuck off* again, but she gets the message. She scrambles to the edge of the roof and throws her leg over without looking back, taking the money with her. I watch the shadow of her ass in the moonlight, the same way a predator might watch its prey scamper off on a hot Sahara day. Sometimes it's too much trouble to catch something to eat, sometimes survival is more trouble than it's worth. I could have had her for a hundred dollars.

A faint scratch of metal against concrete, and then she's gone.

Back into the seething mass of partygoers, the ocean of joy that I can't join. I'm stuck on this island, and for maybe the first time, I'm glad of it. What I wanted with her wasn't good or clean. It wasn't kind.

The scaffolding where Harper and Christopher had stood is empty. The people around it still do their ritual dance, but the gods are no longer listening. Having sex, that's what the gods are doing now. I can't see them, but I know it as surely as I feel the bass reverberate through the old building holding me up. I can imagine Harper's red lips and Christopher's dark eyes. There is no girl to use. Ashleigh. Ash. Leigh. I pick up the empty bottle of Jim Beam, the proof that I'm no better than my daddy, and throw it against the ledge of the roof, watch it shatter into a million sharp glittering pieces.

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Skye Warren is the New York Times bestselling author of dangerous romance such as the Endgame trilogy. Her books have been featured in Jezebel, Buzzfeed, USA Today Happily Ever After, Glamour, and Elle Magazine. She makes her home in Texas with her loving family, sweet dogs, and evil cat.

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